

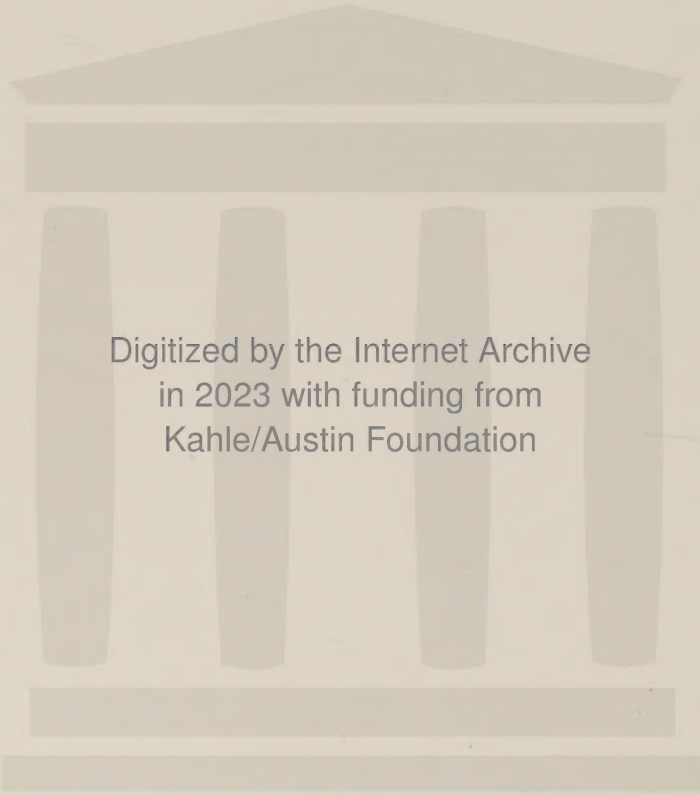
"PROMISES, PROMISES"

H.B.* & His/Her Bible Adventures

Volume 2

by H.B. George Harper

* Human Being



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"PROMISES, PROMISES"

Bish,
I promise
you'll like
These H.B.s.

— George
Hanger

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Bible Adventures**

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CONTENTS

<i>Introduction</i>	1
---------------------------	---

JOSHUA

The New Commander	5
Carving Up the Territory	17

JUDGES

Campfire Tales	27
Ehud	28
Deborah	29
Jael	31
Gideon	32
Another Round	41
Abimelech and Jotham	41
Jephthah	45
Samson	50
Anarchy	61

RUTH

Daughter-In-Law	71
-----------------------	----

I SAMUEL

A Prophet Is Born	81
A Kingdom Coming	89
"We Want Saul!"	95
Saul and Jonathan	103
Mixed Signals	109
The Giant Killer	115
Hide and Go Seek	123
Close Encounters	133

II SAMUEL

David Moves In	147
Israel Reunited	155
A Neighbor to Love	163
Family Affairs	169
The Absalom Story	177
Settling Up	187
A Time To Remember	195
From King to Kings	203

Introduction

Their word pictures of God may not always have been the same as ours would be today. Their concepts of God's purposes and procedures were certainly no ethical match of Jesus' exhibition centuries after their day. They talked and wrote in male oriented language. But their stories are wonderfully human. Love, courage, faithfulness, dishonesty, violence, sex, open mindedness and bull-headedness . . . it's all here. The characters speak for themselves.

As we draw our word pictures of God in this series of books, we are trying to avoid exclusive male language. These are H.B. (Human Being) books, because the human being is both male and female as far as the Biblical revelation of God is concerned.

Sometimes the Bible gives us the story of H.B. Man, sometimes H.B. Woman. The particular story may be about H.B. Samson or H.B. Ruth, but something in the story is about everyman and everywoman. It is the fact that Samson, David, Ruth, Moses, Jezebel and all the rest of them were Human Beings that makes their stories informative

and instructive for H.B. in general, and for H.B. You and H.B. Me in particular.

Times, places, and situations change somewhat, but in essence they are repeated again and again since we Human Beings share basically the same location and time and situation in the universal setting.

Whatever happens to H.B. anywhere, anytime, is part of my experience as an H.B., and I can learn from it.

From poverty to prosperity to poverty again; from peace to war to peace again; from freedom to slavery to freedom again; from faith to doubt to faith again, we have followed the Hebrew story from Abraham and Sarah to Moses in Volume I. In this one we meet warriors, judges, common family people, prophets, and finally kings.

They all lived on promises as much as anything else. Just as we do.

Promises, promises!

Joshua

Joshua, The New Commander

“Be strong and of good courage, be not frightened . . .”

Three times in the first ten verses of the book of *Joshua*, the Lord tells that to Joshua who is taking Moses' place as the Hebrew Commander-in-Chief.

What do you think when somebody keeps telling you that there is nothing to be afraid of? You know that actually you must be facing some scary times ahead or your advisor wouldn't have to keep reassuring you.

Joshua was no dummy. He knew from the moment he led the Children of Israel across the Jordan River into Palestine they were going to have to fight for every foot of ground they intended to occupy. And it wasn't going to be any six day war. Six centuries may not see the end of it. But, with God promising that the Promise made to all his ancestors would be kept, Joshua gathered the people after the days of mourning for Moses had past.

“If we are going to do it, then let's do it,” Joshua reasoned. “There is no point in putting it off. In three days we move across the Jordan; get all the provisions ready.”

One thing he had to check out before he started. Were the tribes of Reuben, Gad, and Manasseh, who were planning on settling on the east side of the Jordan where they already were, going to keep their promise they made to Moses? Moses had told them that they could have that land for their grazing flocks if they would first stay with the other tribes in the invasion of the land west of Jordan. They assured Joshua that they would stick by the bargain; they would be part of his army, entirely under his command.

Remembering his experience of many years before when he and Caleb and the other spies had scouted out the territory, Joshua picked two good men and sent them toward Jericho to see what they would be facing. The story doesn't say why their first stop in Jericho was at a house of ill repute, but it was. The two men spent the night with a prostitute named Rahab.

The king of Jericho, knowing that the army of Israelites had taken all the land across the river from him, had his Intelligence Agency on twenty-four hour duty. The word got back to him:

"Two Israelite men have slipped into town tonight; they are staying at the house of Rahab."

Immediately the king sent his agents to knock on Rahab's door.

"O.K., where are they? We know that two men of Israel came into your house tonight. They are spies, and we are here to arrest them."

"Wait just a minute! I don't ask a lot of questions when men come here. It's true that a couple of men came earlier, but they left just before the outer gate closed. In fact, if you hurry you can probably catch up with them on the street at least before they get

back to their camp. So get going!”

The two Hebrews hardly dared breathe for fear of sneezing as they lay under a pile of flax straw on the roof. Rahab had concealed them there just before she answered the knock at the door. Fortunately the officers did not search the place because they were taking Rahab’s tip that they should hurry if they were going to cut off the spies before they crossed the river.

Rahab had been looking out for herself for some time, and she had already made up her mind to be ready for the day when the Hebrews would take over Jericho. The tales about how they had come out of Egypt, and the stories about all the nations they had conquered so far, had not lost anything in the telling and retelling. She admitted that, privately, all the citizens of Jericho knew that their defense could never stand against the coming attack. So she would rather switch her loyalties than fight a losing battle.

“I’ll make a deal with you,” she offered the two men. “I’ll get you out of here safely if you will promise that your army will not bother my family when you take Jericho.”

“We swear by God that you will be spared,” they willingly pledged.

Since her house was built into the outer wall of the city, she let them down by a rope from the window. But first she gave them some good advice.

“Our officers will be blocking every road and path to the river. Take my suggestion and go up into the hills to the west of town. In about three days they will call off the hunt and you can make it back to your camp.”

Now it was their turn to give her advice.

“We won’t forget your help; you can count on that. Just be sure that all your family is gathered here in your house when the city falls. They are liable to get killed if they are on the streets. We can’t be responsible for their safety if they aren’t here; but if they are here nobody will touch them. Just take this red piece of rope and tie it onto your window so our soldiers will know which place is yours.”

Three days later while Joshua was wondering if they had been caught, the two men came into his tent with their report:

“It’s going to be duck soup,” they said. “Everybody there is already scared to death of us.”

“That’s what I wanted to hear, Joshua said. “Tomorrow we start to move.”

Move they did. Camped the next evening on the east bank of the river, Joshua outlined his plan of attack to the tribal leaders.

“We are taking the ark of the covenant with our God and sending it ahead with priests carrying it. I’ll show them where to go. You bring your men after us, but keep about a mile back from the ark. You remember what happens when anybody but the priests get near that thing.”

Actually, Joshua wasn’t quite sure how they were going to cross the river, or what they were going to do after they did. But the Lord was calling the shots one at a time, and he was moving in faith.

It took a lot of faith to believe the first command God gave. The priests with the ark were supposed to go into the river and stand there. Then twelve picked men, one from each of the twelve tribes, were to stand nearby. What would happen then?

Well, the story makes it plain whose side the

Lord was on. As soon as the priests stood in the river, the water from the north stopped flowing completely. All at once there was dry river bottom for the people of Israel to cross. The entire nation, with all their goods, made the crossing dry as a bone while the priests stood there with the ark of the covenant.

Now Joshua found out what the twelve men were for. The Lord said:

“Have each one of the twelve men pick up as large a stone as he can carry from the middle of the river where the priests are standing. I want them to carry those stones to the place where you will make camp tonight on the other side of Jordan. You can keep those stones as souvenirs. Seeing them, your people in the future will remember this miracle.”

Years and years later, people could see the altar of the twelve stones which Joshua set up at the camp site called Gilgal, just outside Jericho.

Once the Jordan river started flowing again the story of what was happening was flooding Jericho and all the other towns on the west bank. Joshua was in no hurry. Fear was doing most of his work for him with the would-be defenders. So Israel took time to celebrate the Passover.

Before the Passover there was time to catch up on circumcising all the males who had been born since the original circumcision ceremony soon after they came out of Egypt. If the enemy forces had known the Israelites were too sore to move for a few days, they could have attacked with some chance of victory. But they sat and waited, more and more ready to accept defeat as their lot.

While they were camped at Gilgal, Joshua had

the people scrounge any food and supplies they could get from the area around them. And an interesting thing happened. The day they started eating the produce of the "Promised Land," that day the manna supply came to an end. If the story is accurate here, manna had been their steady diet for forty years. There is not even one footnote recorded that anyone missed it.

It isn't exactly clear as to whom credit for the Jericho manuever should be given. In chapter 5 there is the report that an angel with a drawn sword appeared to Joshua and told him that he, the angel, would be commander of the army of the Lord. Joshua felt like Moses on the mountain by the burning bush; the ground was holy, so he took off his shoes. Now Joshua had received the same commission that Moses had before him, and as the new Moses he was ready to order the conquest of Canaan.

Apparently it was the Lord's angel's idea that Joshua have the people march around the walled city of Jericho once every day for six days.

"This will drive them crazy," he said. "The first day our army starts circling the city they will think we are coming in. When we don't make a move toward the walls, they will be sure that we are preparing for a night attack. While we are back in camp, they will be standing watch all night.

"The next day and night we will do the same thing for them. For six days they won't get any sleep, and they won't have any trust left in their commanders who keep telling them 'get ready, here they come.'

"Then on the seventh day, the seven priests walking before the ark with the rams horns will

blow them as they have done every day. We will go around once, and then we'll go around again. Now the men of Jericho will be confused. So we will keep going around, three times, four times, five times, six times, seven times. They will get dizzy just watching us. But on the seventh time, I will give the signal for the priests to start a long blast on the trumpets. When you hear that, everybody will shout as loud as they can. Get some word like 'Geronimo' that sounds fierce or 'we're number one.'

"After a week of no sleep they will be so frightened when you attack the city from every side that they won't give you enough resistance to matter. The walls will fall down flat for you, and when your army moves in, it will be worse than an earthquake happening to them."

Well, it happened just that way. The story does not even pause to note that the Hebrews and the Lord ignored the Sabbath Day, although one poor Hebrew man a few miles back had been stoned to death because he gathered firewood on the Sabbath. Somehow H.B. seems always to make allowances for big crimes while he/she is super meticulous about punishing smaller ones. The rich financier who steals a corporation, or the political ruler who plunders a whole country is honored. But the poor man who writes a bad check, or the camper who trespasses on the estate lawn, should be locked up in jail.

The story does pause to appreciate the fact that the Hebrews followed Joshua's (or the angel's?) order to kill every man, woman, and child in Jericho. Only Rahab's family was spared because of the deal she made with the two spies. Not only

that, they killed every animal. No living thing was of any value to them, only the gold, silver and bronze they took before they completely leveled the city with fire. But, by gollies, the religious Hebrews were men of their word. They didn't break their pledge to the harlot. Having established his control over the river valley around Jericho, Joshua was anxious to move into the highlands on the west. Again he sent scouts on ahead. First objective was at a place called Ai. When they came back a few days later, they advised Joshua:

"There's absolutely nothing to worry about. We don't even have to move the whole army out of camp. Send a brigade of two or three thousand up there and we can knock off Ai before lunch."

The brigade Joshua sent up the hill didn't even carry heavy provisions. They expected to get the job of destroying Ai done quickly. And they were back by dusk—but not the way the camp expected them. What was left of the brigade was exhausted from running, and thoroughly whipped!

The men of Ai had been ready for them. Before the Hebrews had a chance to catch their breath from climbing the steep three thousand foot rise, the defenders had sent them reeling in defeat back down the mountain. This was their first defeat, and Joshua and the elders could hardly bear it. He complained to God:

"Our reputation will be ruined. As soon as the Canaanites hear that we can be defeated, they will all gang up on us and wipe us out!"

"So what?" the Lord answered with an obvious lack of interest. "If you folks aren't going to do what I tell you, why should I keep protecting you?"

"What on earth are you talking about, Lord?"

Joshua couldn't believe that he was hearing right.

"I am talking about the deal we had before we leveled Jericho. Nobody was supposed to take any loot for himself, but one of your men did. And you haven't done one thing about it."

It was news to Joshua, disquieting news, and it spurred Joshua into action. That very evening he sent out the order.

"Tomorrow morning early I want every tribe to march by my tent. Come one clan at a time, with each family group together. Somebody has kept some things from the Jericho raid and the Lord and I aim to find who did it."

The next day they came by. First Joshua narrowed it down to the tribe of Judah. Then he separated out the extended family of Zerah, out of which he picked the section of the family that belonged to Zerah's son, Zabdi. Finally he is standing before young Achan, one of Sabdi's grandsons.

"All right, son, let's have the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help you God," said Joshua, now acting as judge.

What could Achan say? "I admit it. I knew it was a sin but when I saw a beautiful imported coat from Babylonia, and a bar of gold, and two hundred shekels of silver, I couldn't resist. I took them. You'll find them buried under my tent."

And that admission buried Achan.

In their great anxiety to placate God as they understood the Divine Being, the people of Israel now joined Joshua in an act that must have broken the heart of God whose Being is divine Love as Jesus revealed it. They took not only Achan but his family and animals and killed them all with rocks. Then they burned all the bodies, together with

every family possession, and heaped a large mound of stones over the whole smouldering pile.

Now the Lord was ready to help again.

“Let’s get back up the mountain to Ai,” God told Joshua. “Only this time take all the fighting men with you, and we will do to Ai what we did to Jericho.”

“The men said that a frontal attack against Ai is murder; they’re on top and we have to fight uphill,” Joshua said.

“Any fool can see that,” the Lord said, “but if we eased around to the other side of the town, we would have a downhill shot at them, wouldn’t we?”

“It figures,” Joshua agreed. “I’ve got a plan shaping up in my mind right now.”

The plan was this: he sent thirty thousand of the best troops to circle around Ai at night to hide in ambush behind the city; then he and all the rest of the people would come up the hill in the morning just like the boys did last time.

“When they see us coming up they will attack and we will act as if we are retreating again. They are so over confident now that they will all come out to chase us. That’s when the army in the bushes behind the town will take over the city.”

It worked perfectly. Sensing a chance to mop up the Hebrews once and for all, every man in Ai stormed out of the city to chase Joshua’s men who were feigning retreat. When he had drawn them far enough from town, Joshua turned and held up his spear. That was the signal for the ambushers to enter the city from the back side. Suddenly the army of Ai was looking back at their burning city, and forward at an Israelite army that had turned

from retreat to attack. Surrounded, there was no where to go. Outnumbered, they had no chance to win.

The king of Ai was left alive to be presented to Joshua as a trophy, but every man in the city was killed by the Israelites who closed in on them. Then, to keep up their reputation that would have brought shame on the most barbaric people of the world of their day, the soldiers turned back on the city to slaughter every woman and child. They kept a body count for bragging purposes: over twelve thousand men, women and children.

To complete the sport that day, Joshua hung the king of Ai from a tree limb until evening. Then he cut him down and flung the body at what was left of the gate to the city. The heap of rocks they piled over the body was the highest point left on the roofline of what had been a thriving city the day before.

For bedtime stories that night, Joshua read to the people all the laws of God which Moses had written. You just can't beat his idea of topping off a good slaughter of human beings, whose only sin was being of the wrong tribe, with a good worship service. It makes a person ready for a comfortable night's sleep.

Carving Up The Territory

News of a marauding army like the Hebrews would bring one of two responses. In this case it got both. One response would be that all the potential enemies would join forces to fight. The other response would be absolute fear, and the willingness to be enslaved if they could just be spared to live.

The kings of six different national groups in Palestine made the first response. They formed a league for defense. But the people of Gibeon decided to surrender even before the Hebrews got to them. And somebody among them had a pretty slick scheme which they decided to try.

"Let's walk right into their camp and plead for mercy," one of them suggested.

"Mercy? Those people don't know what the word means. They think their god wants everybody in this territory wiped out so they can have it for their own," somebody answered.

"Yeah, but we aren't going to be from this territory. They make treaties with people who aren't in their way."

“What do you mean, we aren’t from this territory? Are you thinking we should move out right now?”

“Nope, we can fool them. Now, listen to this. We get all the old worn out packs and sacks that we have in town, and all the old mended wineskins and water canteens. We wear old, patched up sandals, and dirty old clothes. We even get old stale bread and dry, mouldy food to pack in the sacks. And then we go into the Hebrew camps from the east side and act like we have been in the desert traveling for a long time. They won’t think that we are any threat to them and maybe they will make a non-aggression treaty with us.”

“That’s the dumbest thing I ever heard of,” the leading elder said. “It’s so dumb it just might work.”

So they did it. When they pulled into the Hebrew camp they looked like they were on their last legs. Even so, some of the Hebrews weren’t sure about their story because they weren’t able to tell just exactly what country they had come from.

“You want us to make a treaty with you?” Joshua asked. “How do we know you aren’t people who live in this territory? Our god won’t allow us to make any covenants with any nations in this land we are going to possess.”

“Oh, we have heard about your god,” the spokesman for the travelers said. “That’s why we came all this way to find you. We heard about how God brought you out of Egypt, and how God gives you victory in all your battles. That’s why our people sent us to ask for a treaty with you.”

Well, one thing Joshua was jealous about was the reputation of his God, and when the man

started praising the Hebrew God, Joshua let down his guard a little bit. Following up that opening, the men of Gibeon said:

“Look at this bread. It was right out of the oven when we left; now it is stale and dry. These wineskins and canteens were new when we started; they are so dry now that they won’t hold water. And these sandals and clothes we are wearing don’t look like they just came from the store, do they?”

Joshua had to admit that all their story fit together. So they did the Middle Eastern equivalent of smoking the peace pipe, and agreed to live in peace with each other.

It was three days before the real story leaked out and Joshua discovered that he had been tricked. But keeping one’s word was a top priority with the Hebrew leaders. If they said they would kill you, they would, even if they liked you. If they said they wouldn’t harm you, they wouldn’t, even if they hated you. So when they reached the Gibeon area the Israelites were ready for blood, and especially for booty, but Joshua and the leaders held them off.

“We swore that we would not kill them, and we will keep that pledge. However, we didn’t say anything about using them as our slaves. So from now on they will cut wood, draw water, and be our servants.”

“Better to be a live coward than a dead hero,” one Gibeonite leader remarked.

However, after a while it became apparent that the men of Gibeon faced the prospect of being both cowardly and dead. Because the King of Jerusalem lined up the Amorite kings of Hebron, Jarmuth,

Lackish, and Eglon, to join him in an attack on Gibeon since they had joined with the Hebrews.

“S.O.S. . . . May Day . . . Help . . .” the message went down the hill from Gibeon to Gilgal where the Hebrews were camped. “If you don’t come to save us, you will be short on servants, because the whole Amorite confederation is moving into position to attack us.”

There was no hurry, the kings thought as they encircled Gibeon. Even if a messenger had gotten through to Joshua it would take the Hebrews all the next day to climb to Gibeon. But they still had something to learn about Joshua, and they were to learn it the hard way.

By the time the runner from Gibeon was on his way back with the news that the Hebrews were coming, Joshua’s front line forces were marching after him. All night they hiked from Gilgal, and the next morning when the sun came up on the Amorite camps so did Joshua. Caught by surprise, they panicked and fled. The Israelites pursued them all day, killing everyone they caught. But for every one the army got with the sword, the Lord got two with the largest hailstones ever reported.

Certainly something cataclysmic happened to the weather that day because a Hebrew song about the battle later declared that the sun itself stood still so that Joshua could finish off the enemy. The five Amorite kings were holed up in a cave at Makedah, knowing that all was lost. When word came to Joshua that they had been spotted there, Joshua told the soldiers:

“Just roll a big stone over the mouth of the cave. We will deal with them later; but you keep pursuing the enemy. Try to get between them and their

cities and cut them off.”

Only a few did escape into the fortified cities; all the rest fell to Hebrew swords and spears. At evening the clank of armor had given way to the silence that hovers over the dead of a deserted battlefield.

Meanwhile, the five kings cringed in the darkness of the cave where they were trapped. Joshua was in no hurry to get to them. He wanted all his men back to the base before he made sport of them. It was the next day when he ordered the cave opened and the prisoners brought out.”

“Stretch them out on the ground before us,” he ordered. “Now I want every officer in our army to come by and stand with his feet on the necks of these ‘great’ kings. This is the way it is going to be with all our enemies.”

One by one they left their footprints on the captives and then stood by while Joshua himself killed each one with his sword. They hung the five bodies in trees for everyone to admire all day. Then at night they threw the bodies back into the cave where they could be in hiding with each other forever.

Then the fortified cities began to fall to the Hebrew army like railroad stops being passed by an Express: Maddedah . . . Libnah . . . Lachish . . . Gezer . . . Eglon . . . Hebron . . . Debir . . . and all points west and south. In every case the story was the same: every living being killed. As the Biblical writer of *Joshua* 10 put it: “he left none remaining, but utterly destroyed all that breathed, as the Lord God of Israel commanded.” (verse 40)

Is this the same God who first breathed life into H.B., and who was later revealed in the Hebrew

who prayed, "Father, forgive them; they don't know what they are doing?" In the desperate search for understanding the nature of the Divine Being, in whose image all Human Beings are supposed to be made, there would have to be a lot more questions asked, and a lot more experience incorporated, before the religion of Joshua would become the religion of Jesus.

All we can do now is to hold our breath and tiptoe through these stories of the Hebrew conquest of Canaan. Hopefully, the excursion through this part of our religious history can bring us to the place where we can identify the same blind spots in religious or political leaders today when they call us to serve God by stepping on the necks of those who may be in our way. It will be a great day when we H.B.s can tell the difference between a Joshua response to God and a Jesus response.

Chapter 11 is a recital of more of the same. One after the other, the peoples of the area of Palestine were exterminated so that the tribes of Israel could divide the land among themselves. Chapter 12 summarizes all of Israel's conquests under Moses and Joshua. There is only one saving note to brighten the picture: as we keep reading Hebrew history, we will discover that all of these people who were wiped out in the Joshua stories are still going to be around for future leaders like Saul, David, Gideon, etc. to deal with. It will become apparent that the religious writers who told the stories centuries later were coming up with more total victories than the Hebrews under Moses and Joshua ever did!

"All things come to him who waits." Maybe Caleb (remember the scouting expedition Moses

sent out “to spy out the land flowing with milk and honey?”) first said that. Because there is the little story in *Joshua* 14 where Caleb says, in effect, to Joshua:

“By the way, old buddy, remember when we went on that spying mission forty-five years ago? Moses promised me then that the land I walked over would be mine someday. You took over from Moses. How about it? Am I going to get that property or not?”

“Man, what a memory!” Joshua commented. “Are you sure you remember where the property is?”

“Sure do,” Caleb replied. “All that hill country we just captured around the city of Hebron, plus another forty acres I had my eye on.”

“Where’s that?” Joshua asked.

“Downtown Hebron.”

So Caleb got his inheritance at the lusty age of 85. And the story goes on from chapter 15 to give a surveyor’s account of the boundaries of the territory each tribe would be given. There was only one hitch; these accounts (perhaps a little more realistic than the first twelve chapters) admit that the natives were still arguing over ownership. For the most part, Joshua and the high priest, Eleazer, were saying, “This is your land; all you have to do now is take it. Good luck!”

At a hundred and ten years of age, Joshua was buried on his country estate in Ephraim, but not before he had seen to it that the bones of Joseph had been placed in Jacob’s tomb at Shechem. And not before he gave a farewell address as Moses had done.

“Serve God and you will be o.k. Forget God, or be

unfaithful to God, and you will have nothing but trouble.” That was the jist of his advice. And H.B. everywhere sooner or later comes to that same conclusion if he/she learns anything from the experience.

Judges

Campfire Tales

It's a beautiful night, with stars shining bright in a clear sky, and the harvest moon shouldering its way up over the eastern hills. Around the little camp fire the circle of old men sit politely listening to each other tell for the hundredth time the stories of the great heroes and heroines of the tribes of Israel.

Each year the Old Timer's Convention met, and each year the Moses and Joshua stories were told first. All the tribes shared that history together. But after their ancestors had moved into the Promised Land the different tribes had gone through different experiences. That's when the story telling really got interesting, because each man's tale about some famous person of his tribe had to compare favorably with the tales told by the other men about their heroes.

"I suppose you men have heard about the left handed son of our tribe, Benjamin, who saved all of Israel from the oppression of Moab."

Whether they had or not, the story was coming again:

EHUD

“Yeh, it was like this. Moab had a big fat king named Eglon. Every year our folks had to send a whole pack train of valuables to him as tribute. Well, this one year one of our fellows named Ehud was assigned to the duty of taking the tribute. And Ehud got a plan in his head.

“He made a short sword that was 18 inches long, and sharpened it on both sides. He made a scabbard for it and tied it on his right thigh under his clothes. When he and the carriers got all the tribute into Eglon’s storeroom, Ehud had all the others leave because he told the king that he had a secret message for him. So the king sent all his attendants out of the room too because he was anxious to get this secret from Ehud.

“Well, he got it.

“Ehud came over to him and said, ‘I have a message from God for you.’ That got Eglon’s attention, and he stood up. And while Ehud was holding up his right hand to show he had nothing in it, he reached under his cloak with his left hand and pulled the sword. Did I say that Ehud was left handed? Well, he stuck that fat king right in the belly. Eglon was so fat that the sword went all the way in and even the hilt disappeared so that Ehud never pulled it out.

“This Ehud was cool as a cucumber. He got the job done and just walked calmly out of the door and locked it behind him. After he was gone, the king’s servants came up to the king’s room but they found the doors locked, of course. And they just

figured that Eglon had shut them so he wouldn't be disturbed while he went to the bathroom in private.

"Well, they waited and waited. Finally, they got worried, so they got a key to the room and unlocked the door. That's when they found him dead.

"Of course, Ehud was long gone by the time they set up the alarm.

"But that wasn't all." The listeners knew that it wasn't because they had heard the story a good many times. "Nope, Ehud didn't stop there. He figured that the Moabites would be so upset for a few days that they wouldn't be thinking of anything but the king's funeral and finding a new king. So he got all our folks together and told them that the Lord was ready to help them overthrow the Moabites. And that's exactly what they did. They lit into the men of Moab and before they got through they had laid about ten thousand of them away.

"Yessir! It was eighty years before the Moabites gave us any trouble again!"

There was appreciative silence around the circle, until somebody said:

"I suppose you are going to tell us about your man Shamgar who killed six hundred Philistines with an ox goad about that same time."

"Nope," the old timer grinned. "That would just be too much for you boys to take tonight."

There was a sigh of relief from someone.

... "but I am going to tell you about how the Canaanites some time later got the upper hand on our tribe and we got another hero."

"Another left handed man?" someone asked.

"Nope, this wasn't even a man. It was a woman."

DEBORAH

“What a woman she was! Her name was Deborah. She was one of the judges of Israel in the old days. People came from all over to get advice from her. They can still show you the palm tree she sat under on the road from Ramah to Bethel.

“Well, there was this general named Sisera. He was commander of the armies of Canaan, and he was a fierce one. He had nine hundred iron chariots that ran rough-shod over everybody and everything. Our men had been secretly preparing for war with him for a long time, but none of our leaders had nerve enough to start anything. But this Deborah had a plan.

“She called one of our underground leaders named Barak and told him that the time had come to take on Sisera. He told her that he could get about twenty thousand men together, but none of them were going to move out unless she promised to go with them. She told him that it wasn’t going to look good for him if a woman turned out to be the hero of the battle, but he said he didn’t care who got the credit. Good man, Barak was.

“Well, to make a long story short . . .” which he never did, “Deborah showed Barak where to get his men on the high ground at Mount Tabor so they could shoot down at Sisera’s chariots which would have to come up the river valley, instead of having the men in the chariots shooting down at them.”

“Did it work?” somebody put in because the story teller had paused for just such a question.

“Did it work? I’ll tell the world it worked. Deborah gave the signal and blessed the army in the name of the Lord, and the boys lit into the Ca-

naanites. The heavy chariots weren't much good on the wet ground, and our men wiped out the whole bunch. When Sisera saw how things were going, he made a run for it. But his chariot wasn't going fast enough so he struck out on foot. He got away, too. He ran all the way to a place where a fellow named Heber lived, thinking he was in a neutral zone."

Jael

"And here's where another woman comes in. Heber's wife was named Jael. This Jael was something, too. She got the general to come into the tent and said that he would be safe if he would just lie under a rug she would throw over him. First, he had to have a drink of water, and then he got under the rug. It wasn't five minutes before he was asleep, being so worn out from running. And you know what Jael did?"

They were leaning forward now to see if the finish would be the same as it always had been.

"I'll tell you what she did. She took a tent peg and a hammer and tiptoed over to Sisera. Then she drove that peg right through his head and pinned him to the ground. I don't suppose he ever knew what hit him.

"Just about that time, Barak pulls up with some of his men that had been chasing Sisera that way. Jael was out to meet him.

"'Were you looking for General Sisera?'

"'You bet I am,' Barak replied.

"'Well, come with me and I will take you to him.' She opened the flap of the tent and Barak looked in to see Sisera . . . with the tent peg through his head.

“‘May the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob be praised!’ Barak said.

“‘I did it for the God of Sarah, Rebekah and Rachel,’ Jael added out loud.

“That’s the story,” the old man concluded. “Our ancestors got up a whole song about Deborah and Jael. Do you want to hear it?”

“One of the strings on the guitar busted,” a younger man offered quickly. “Why don’t we just wait and hear that another night? Or, better still, why don’t you just write it out and we will call it chapter 5 when the book on *Judges* is printed?”

“Well, that was a couple of pretty good stories,” said an oldster from the other side of the campfire circle, “but I can tell you one that people will be telling for hundreds of years from now.”

“Let me guess,” another leathery faced old timer threw in. “It isn’t the tale about Gideon, is it?”

The second story teller ignored the sarcasm and moved right ahead.

GIDEON

“Yep, this one is about Gideon. Way back in the time when the people of Midian had been running over Israel for seven years . . .” (If the speaker had ever heard the story of how Moses exterminated every male of Midian, including babies, he didn’t mention it, because somehow these two stories don’t exactly fit). . . ‘things were so bad that our people had to beat out the wheat and make bread in secret or the Midianites would take it from them. And one day this young man, Gideon, was sifting out wheat in an old wine press to fool them, and he looked up and saw an angel sitting under a tree

close by. This angel said, 'The Lord is with you, you know.'

""Sure. Sure,' Gideon said. 'The Lord is with us; that's why we are like slaves here. We're back in Egypt, man. The Lord that saved our fathers from Egypt has forgotten about us now.'

""Not so,' the answer came back. 'I'm talking to you now, and I'm telling you that you are going to deliver Israel from Midian.'

""Me? I am from the weakest clan in the smallest tribe, and I am the weakest one in my family. You must be joking.'

""But when I am with you, you will have all the strength you need.'

(Whatever his/her understanding of God's will, one thing that H.B. should have learned by now is that this is the summary statement of all human experience.)

""I hate to sound doubtful, Lord,' Gideon said, 'but could I ask for a little proof? Wait right here while I go into the house and fix a little lunch for us.' In a little while he was back with the picnic basket.

""Take that food and set it over on that rock,' the Lord told him. 'And then step back.'

"No sooner had Gideon moved back than a flame came right out of the rock and burned up all the food in an instant. And when Gideon looked around to say something about it, the Lord had vanished into thin air.

"That night the Lord was back. 'I don't like that altar to Baal which your father has beside the house, nor that wooden idol of a pagan goddess which is set up beside it. Tear them down and take the wood to offer a burnt offering on a stone altar

you shall build for Me.'

"It was a good thing it was night, or Gideon and his hired men would have been afraid to do that in the daylight. The next day the people of the town were angry about it, but Gideon told them that if Baal were really God he could take care of himself.

"By the way, you good Hebrews, are you going to keep standing up for Baal or are you going to take a stand with me for Yahweh. It's time we stopped acting like cringing dogs,' Gideon challenged them. The Lord must have stirred some of the rest of them, too, because word spread through Manasseh's territory and Gideon even sent messengers to Zebulun and Naphtali. In just a little while, Gideon gathered up quite an army, but the Midianites and Amalakites had been getting their armies together in the valley of Jezreel, ready to stamp out this rebellion before it started.

"By now, Gideon is getting a little nervous again. He wanted some more proof that God was really running the show.

"I'll just lay this fleece of wool on the threshing floor tonight. If there is dew on the wool but none on the ground around it tomorrow morning, I'll know that You are still with us, Lord.'

"The next morning he could wring enough water out of that fleece to fill a good-sized bowl. Could that have been an accident? Gideon wondered. So he got this idea.

"This time, Lord, let the fleece be dry and all the ground around it be wet with dew.' And what do you know? It was. That settled Gideon's doubts, and he led the volunteer army out to meet the big army of Midian.

"Now here comes the strange part."

Everybody knew what it was, but they liked to hear it again, too.

“Gideon was worrying about meeting all the fighters ahead of him with a much smaller bunch of untrained volunteers, when all at once the Lord came out with an absolutely unbelievable statement.

“‘I think we have too many soldiers.’

“‘How’s that, Lord? Maybe I didn’t hear you correctly,’ Gideon whispered.

“‘You heard it right. If we attack the Midianites with all these men, Israel will always think they won this battle on their own strength. We can’t have that. So tell everybody who has any doubts about fighting to pack up and go home.’

“Gideon found out that two-thirds of his soldiers were just hoping somebody would raise the question. Only ten thousand out of thirty-two thousand were left after Gideon gave them the choice.

“‘Well, we are down to ten thousand, and they’ve only got about a million,’ Gideon said. ‘Are you satisfied, Lord?’

“‘No, not yet. We still have way too many. I tell you what. Take them down to the creek and tell each one to get a drink. I’ll watch them and tell you which ones to keep and which ones to send home.’

“When they got to the creek, God said ‘Watch which ones kneel down to drink; they can go home. Watch which ones scoop up water in their hand to lap it like a dog; those we will keep.’ (God explained later that the ones who got down on their knees and put their faces in the water to drink would be easy to surprise. The ones who kept their heads up and eyes open would be ready for anything.)

“Three hundred. that’s all he had left when his

test was over. Three hundred.

“‘Now that’s about right,’ God said. ‘We’ve got this army down to a manageable group.’

“‘Well, it’s your show, Lord,’ Gideon exclaimed, ‘but I sure don’t see how we are going to tackle that mob with only three hundred men!’

“‘I’ll show you how. Take all the bugles and all the lanterns from the people who are going home. You ought to be able to get three hundred out of all of them. I want every man to have a horn and a lantern jar. But before I tell you my plan, you and your man, Purah, can walk into the enemy camp tonight and see what they are saying down there.’

“So Gideon and Purah eased along through the outer edge of the camp until they came up behind one tent where they heard two men talking. One was telling the other about a dream that he had the night before:

“‘I’m telling you it was a cake of barley bread that tumbled down off the hill right into the Midian camp and knocked down the tent, knocked it flat.’

“‘Yeah, we’ve got to watch eating those hard rolls the cook makes just before we go to bed. No, seriously, I think that dream means that Gideon is going to strike down Midian the same way.’

“That was what the Lord wanted Gideon to hear. Now he knew that the enemy was on edge and looking for disaster to strike. Back up the hill he went and deployed the three hundred men all around the edge of the valley camp of Midian. ‘Here’s our plan,’ he said.

“‘Every man take his bugle and his lamp inside a jar. Spread out till it looks like each one of you is leading a whole squadron of fighters. When I blow my horn, everybody start blowing the horns. When

I break my jar so that the lantern is seen, everybody do the same. Then start yelling: "A sword for the Lord and for Gideon!"

"So they spread out quietly and waited. About midnight Gideon started the uproar. Everywhere they looked the soldiers in the valley saw the torches of captains coming with their men to attack. In the dark, they struck out at any thing that moved, and they were killing each other while Gideon's men stayed out of it. Then they started running.

"Gideon had planned for that, too. He had sent out runners to rouse all the other Israelite tribes in that area to cut off the Midianites and wipe them out. It was really something: thousands of armed men running for their lives and Gideon and his three hundred men chasing them."

"How far did they run, grand dad?" one of the circle asked.

"They chased them all the way across the Jordan river and up the other side. By the time they got to the town of Succoth, Gideon had to stop for supplies. The men were lying all around the field outside of town trying to catch their breath while Gideon went into town to see the head man.

"My men and I have got the Midian kings, Zebah and Zalmunna, on the run. Give me some bread so that we will have something to eat before we finish them off."

"The Succoth men found that pretty hard to believe because they had seen about forty thousand Midianite soldiers march past their town a few days before headed west. 'We don't see Zebah and Zalmunna in your hand,' the elders said. So they refused Gideon's request.

"All right, gentlemen," Gideon flung back, 'just

stay here till I finish the Midianites and I will come back and take this place apart.'

"So he moved on to the next town close by. It was called Penuel. They refused to give Gideon any supplies either. And Gideon made them the same promise. Hungry or not, he and his men pressed on. At a place named Karkor they caught up with the two kings and their men.

"One more time, boys, and then we can rest,' Gideon told his fighters. 'They are so tired they won't be guarding the caravan road behind the city; we'll hit them from there.'

"You know the rest of the story. Gideon routed the army of Midian again and took the two kings captive. Then, after his men had rested and eaten plenty for a couple of days, they headed for home—by way of Succoth and Penuel. On the way to Succoth, Gideon picked up a young man from that town. With a little persuasion, the young man wrote down a list of all the 'officials and elders' of Succoth.

"When Gideon and his men got to town this time, they were in no hurry.

"I'll just wait while you call all the elders together because I have something to show them,' Gideon told them. A little while later the whole council was gathered, and after checking his list for attendance at the meeting, Gideon told his men:

"Show them what we have in our hand. Gentlemen, this is king Zebah and this is king Zalmunna. Since I didn't actually have them in hand when I asked you for bread for my men a few days ago, I promised you that I would come back and teach you a lesson in hospitality.'

"It was a brutal 'lesson' Gideon taught them. He

had them flogged with thorn branches and briars.

"At Pennuel he did worse. He had all the men killed and the city tower torn down. Then he was ready to deal with the two kings. First he made sure that they remembered having killed his brothers at Tabor.

"That's why I am going to have you killed. Son, you can have the honor,' Gideon said to his oldest son. But the boy, Jether, refused to draw his sword and kill them; he didn't want any part of it.

"Why don't you do it yourself?' the two kings said. And Gideon did.

"When the conquerors got home, they were given a hero's welcome. Some of the men wanted to make Gideon their ruler, but Gideon bowed out of the picture, saying that they should have no ruler but God. Then he got the idea of asking them all to bring the gold and precious jewels they had captured so he could have an ephod, a rich vestment for the priest, made of it. The terrible thing is that the people later on thought more of that ephod than they did of God; it wasn't shaped like the golden calf Aaron made in the wilderness, but it became like an idol to Gideon's people," the old man added. And he grew silent.

"Was that the end of Gideon?" somebody asked.

"No, Gideon went home and kept himself busy raising a family. He had seventy sons by all of his wives, but an affair he had in Shechem with a concubine produced one more son, and he was one everybody has heard about, Abimelech."

Some of the old timers were beginning to get sleepy as the campfire had burned down, so there was common agreement that they would pick up the story telling the next evening.

Another Round

The next night the Old Timers' Convention was at it again.

"I ought to be the first tonight because my family was from Shechem in the old days," said one of those seated close to the fire.

"Meaning what?" another asked.

"Meaning that the stories cut off last night just as we were getting to Abimelech. And Abimelech was from Shechem. Remember?"

ABIMELECH AND JOTHAM

Since Abimelech surely was from Shechem, there was no argument there. So the self-appointed opening speaker continued.

"Yessir, this Abimelech was a crafty one. He got his friends in Shechem to agree that they would rather have one man (him, of course) to rule their territory instead of the council of the other seventy sons of Gideon. They even raised a fund so that their boy, Abimelech, could hire a group to help him in his campaign to be elected ruler. A bunch of thugs is what they were. And his campaign was simple: eliminate the opposition.

"One day his gang caught the seventy brothers in a meeting and adjourned it by killing every one

of them on a large stone.”

“He killed them all?” somebody asked, just to spur on the monologue.

“Well, no. All but one. The youngest brother hid and got away later. But the people of Shechem had their choices narrowed down to one candidate, so they elected Abimelech to be their king.

“When Jotham, the young son of Gideon who got away, heard that news, he came out of hiding. He got on a soap box down town at Mt. Gerazin and made this speech:

“Listen to me, my friends, and I will tell you a story the Lord of Israel wants you to hear.

“The trees decided they needed a king to rule over them. First they asked the olive tree. But the olive tree said that his oil business was going so good that he wouldn’t want to give up his private business for a government job.

“Next they asked a fig tree. But the fig business was booming that year, too, so he declined their nomination. Then they asked the grape vine. The grape vine said that his products were just beginning to market well, and that this would not be a good time for him to take on the job of ruling over the tree kingdom.

“Finally, they went to the bramble.

“Come and reign over us,’ they all said. The bramble knew that he didn’t come from royal stock, so he said, ‘If you are anointing me king over you in good faith, then move over here and grow in the shade of my thorns; but if you aren’t acting in good faith, fire will come out of my underbrush and devour even the great cedars of Lebanon.’

“But what does that story mean?’ the people wanted to know from Jotham.

“‘It means that if you acted in good faith when you elected Abimelech king because you think he is so honorable, and if you think that Gideon’s house was dealt with fairly, after my father risked his life for you and rescued you from the Midianites—if you are sure you have done the right thing in rising up against my father’s family and killing the seventy sons, and that you have made this son of one of the maid-servants your king because he is so sterling in character—then I hope he enjoys you and you enjoy him as king. But if not, then let fire come from Abimelech and consume all of you, and let your fire one day consume him!’

“‘There wasn’t time to say any more. Jotham had to put plenty of distance between himself and Abimelech’s jurisdiction.

“‘Well, what Jotham predicted came true. It wasn’t three years before an underground group of revolutionaries was being formed in Shechem. They were out to get Abimelech. Before long, it broke into the open. At a festival in the fall when everybody was using too much wine to celebrate the grape harvest, a fellow named Gael got to doing some big talking.

“‘‘We ought to string that Abimelech up. I’m telling you that if I were the leader of Shechem I would take the fighters we have right now and put the run on Mr. A.’

“‘After everybody sobered up, they realized that they had given Gael the go-ahead to lead a revolt.

“‘It didn’t take word long to get to the king. In fact, Zebul, the man who had been the head of the city government sent word to Abimelech, told him what was going on, and asked him to send some

troops over by night to be ready to attack Gael's men by morning.

"Four companies Abimelech sent over, and they surrounded the city under cover of darkness. The next morning, Gael went out to the city gates as they were opened. He glanced up at the hillside near town and said to Zebul, who just happened to be standing at this elbow, 'Look, men are coming down that hill.'

"Zebul answered calmly, 'Oh, I don't think so. Those early morning mountain shadows will fool you sometimes.'

"But now Gael was looking out across the fields. 'No, look again. I'm sure I see some men coming up that draw on the other side of the road, over there by the sacred oak tree. I'm sure of it.'

"And he was, because by now the men were pouring in from every direction. And Zebul said, 'Well, you are bragging about taking on Abimelech's army. It looks like they are going to accommodate you if you want a fight.'

"Quickly Gael rounded up his men and went out to fight. The fight didn't last long, and when the survivors tried to get back to the walled city, they found that Zebul had shut the gates behind them. The next day Abimelech's men stormed the city itself and killed the people in it. And then he burned it to the ground and scattered salt all over it so that nothing would ever grow there. Jotham's little story was beginning to unfold. The bramble fire had consumed the trees that set him up as ruler.

"On top of Mount Zalmon, about a thousand of the citizens sealed themselves up in the Tower of Shechem, a great fortress. But Abimelech per-

sonally led his men in gathering a mountain of wood sticks which they stacked around the tower and burned it down on top of the people.

“That strategy worked so well that he moved on to the next town, Thebez, which was also threatening revolt, and he was storming their tower fortress the same way. Only this time he forgot to protect himself from the top side. A woman of the town took a big millstone onto the roof, slid it over the place where Abimelech was standing by the gate and let it go. Her aim was perfect, and she cracked his skull with the stone.

“You talk about a male chauvinist! Abimelech actually had his armor-bearer finish him with a sword, just so nobody could say that a woman killed him in battle.”

“And so the other half of Jotham’s story of the trees came true!” another man added. He wanted to make sure everybody remembered the point, and he also wanted a chance to tell his stories next.

JEPHTHAH

“You know, the story of Jephthah, the great man of Gilead, was just the opposite from Abimelech’s in a way. His father also had several sons by his wives, and Jephthah was the son he had by a prostitute. When Abimelech grew up he did away with all the regular brothers, but when Jephthah grew up the regular family of brothers kicked him out because they said he didn’t belong.

“In fact, young Jephthah ended up over in Tob and became the leader of a worthless bunch of thieves. They were known far and wide as a pretty tough outfit. Well, it just so happened that the Am-

monites declared war on Israel.

“And guess who the elders of Gilead wanted to be the leader of their defense? That’s right, Jephthah. But Jephthah wouldn’t have anything to do with them after the way they had kicked him out. They kept asking though, ‘till finally he said he would help protect them if they would make him the head man in all Gilead. They agreed, and Jephthah took over.

“First thing he did was smart. He got the Ammonites to talking instead of fighting. He sent a message to their king, and asked, ‘what do you folks have against us that you would want to attack us?’

“Their answer was that, three hundred years before, Moses and the people of Israel had taken the land up in Arnon and Jabbok river area from their ancestors. Jephthah did a little research of the old records and found out that the Israelites had not taken that land from the Ammonites at all; they had taken it from a king named Sihon, an Amorite who would not let them cross his land. ‘The land never was yours. Our God gave it to us. Why don’t you be content with the land your god has given you?’ Jephthah told the Ammonite king.

“But the Ammonites were spoiling for a fight, so Jephthah decided to get them before the Ammonites took the offensive. With the spirit of the Lord urging him on, Jephthah gathered a good sized army around his corps of brawlers and waded into the Ammonites. Before the first battle, he made a vow to God: ‘If you let me win, when I go home the first person who comes out of my door to meet me I will offer as a burnt sacrifice to You.’”

“Wait a minute!” somebody broke in. “The other nations made human sacrifices, but Israel had a

law against that ever since Moses' time."

"I know, I know," the old speaker said. "But you are forgetting that there were three or four centuries when some of our leaders took on some of the awful religious customs of the world at that time. I hate to say it, too, but it is a true story I am telling you tonight. And this was actually the vow that Jephthah made. He would sacrifice the first person that came out of his house to greet him when he returned home.

"Well, Jephthah cleaned up on the Ammonites, and came back to his home at Mizpah, not thinking of anything but the victories he had won. And just as he was turning in at the gate, out from the front door of his house came his little daughter. She was going to give her daddy a big surprise, with her dancing clothes and a timbrel. She was the welcoming committee.

"Jephthah almost died of a heart attack. His only child, the love of his life, and he had made a vow to kill her as a burnt offering to God!"

"No, no," somebody cried out. "Our God wouldn't want that."

"Of course, we know that," the speaker came back. "But Jephthah didn't. And the daughter even thought that her daddy was honor bound to go through with it, since he had made a vow to God. She told him:

"Just let me have two months to go camping with my friends in the mountains, and then I will come back."

"At the end of two months, she came back and the human sacrifice was made.

"Every year since, the people of our area have taken four days of celebration to remember the virgin daughter of Jephthah and her willingness to

sacrifice herself for her father's honor.

"I see that our man from the tribe of Dan is getting ready to tell a story we all look forward to, but before he does let me add just one more thing I forgot to mention. I get so emotional every time I recall that story of Jephthah's daughter."

They all nodded understandingly.

"You remember that the old tribe of Ephraim was jealous of Jephthah's success, and they attacked Gilead. That was a big mistake. Jephthah's men were just looking for somebody to take on after they had cleaned up on the Ammonites. They chopped up Ephraim's army which crossed the Jordan into their territory, and then they set up roadblocks at every place the river could be crossed, waiting for the ones who tried to slip across and get home again.

"Every time they got some man trying to cross, they asked him 'Are you from Ephraim?' Of course, he would say 'No.'

"'Oh yeah,' they would answer, 'say "Shibboleth."'

"'What?'

"'Say Shibboleth.'

"'O.K., Sibboleth.'

"And that's when they killed him. For some reason, the people of Ephraim just never could pronounce that 'h' in 'Shibboleth!'

They all looked at the old timers from Ephraim. "Is that right? Come on, can you say 'Shibboleth?'"

"Of course we can . . . Sibboleth!"

After the laughter around the circle, the man from Dan cleared his throat to get attention again.

"No need to mention the judges who ran Israel's

affairs for the next thirty years, but without strong leadership the people forgot to honor our God. They got so weak that the Philistines conquered our people and for forty years there was nothing but misery.

“But one day the Lord stepped back into the picture. The Lord had an angel tell the wife of one of our men named Manoah that she was going to have a son, and that she should dedicate her son to the Lord so that he could save Israel from the Philistines. They called such dedicated people ‘Nazarites’ then just as we do.

“Well, she told her husband, of course, and Manoah wanted to meet this man who had brought that message to his wife. He wanted to ask him what instructions the Lord had for raising such a son.

“The next time the man appeared, while she was out in a field alone, she ran and brought Manoah. And Manoah found out that this boy was not to eat anything unclean, never taste wine or strong drink, and never have a hair cut.

“I don’t know whether Manoah was thinking that it certainly would be cheaper to raise such a son than the average boy, but he was happy about it all, and he invited the messenger to stay for supper. He didn’t know that the man was an angel until the man said:

“‘I won’t eat it, but I would appreciate having my part as a sacrificial meal.’ And when Manoah prepared an altar fire for the burnt offering, the angel just disappeared in the flame. Manoah was sure that they would both die because they had seen the Lord, but Mrs. Manoah said that was silly. ‘If God were going to kill us, God wouldn’t have ac-

cepted our offering, or shown us all these things to do.'

"That made sense. And she was right.

SAMSON

"The child was born and they named him Samson. He grew up big and strong, and very normal. When he was a young man, he saw a Philistine girl that just bowled him over. He asked his parents to get her for his wife. Manoah didn't want to do it because she was not an Israelite, but Samson insisted, and went down to the vineyards at a place called Timnah where the girl lived. On the way a young lion stepped out in the path and bared his teeth with a roar at Samson. As he thought about it later, Samson couldn't explain why he wasn't frightened at all. Instead he just calmly grabbed the jaws of the lion and ripped him apart. His strength amazed Samson himself, so he didn't tell his parents about the incident at all, not even when he noticed later that a swarm of bees were storing honey in the old carcass, honey which he took home to share with them.

"Anyway, he liked the girl, And the next time he went down to Timnah it was to marry her. His parents went along and the groom's father threw a big feed since that was a custom then. Samson had thirty young men who were his attendants, and Samson saw an opportunity to make a good deal. This boy had a good mind as well as a good body.

"'I tell you what,' he said to the groomsmen, 'if you can guess the answer to a riddle I will put to you, I will give each one of you a suit of clothes.'

"That got their attention, and one of them said 'how long do we have to think about it?' And

another one said 'what if we don't guess it? I know you, and you aren't going to make a wager where you can't possibly win anything from us.'

"Samson was ready for that. 'First,' he says, 'you can have seven days to work on it. Second, if you can't answer it, I want the same pay-off from each of you guys, a suit of clothes good enough to wear to a wedding.'

"Thirty heads are better than one, they figured, so they said:

"'O.K., you're on. Tell us the riddle.'

"'Out of the eater came something to eat; out of the strong came something sweet.'

"'That's it?'

"'That's it. You've got seven days to solve the riddle.'

"Well, the men went to work on it. But after three days they were still without an idea as to what the riddle meant. So, on the fourth day they went to see Samson's bride.

"'Entice your husband to tell us what the riddle is,' they said to her. And then they had a nice way of emphasizing how badly they wanted her cooperation.

"'If you don't, we'll burn your father's house down with you in it!'

"Samson's wife took the warning to heart, and she began to work on Samson. First she tried the tearful approach. 'You don't really love me. You told my friends, your groomsmen, a riddle, and you haven't told me what it is.'

"'Listen, honey (unwittingly giving a clue by that term of endearment) I haven't even told my own mother and father. Sorry.'

"But she kept on. For the next three days she shed enough tears to float Noah's ark again, but

Samson wouldn't give in. On the seventh day, he thought it was safe to tell her so she would stop that infernal crying. She dried her tears all right, and it wasn't ten minutes before she had slipped the riddle to the men.

"Just before sundown of the seventh day, while Samson was counting his coat hangers to see how he was going to store all of his new clothes, the men came to him. There was something about the way they were smiling that Samson didn't like.

"One of them spoke:

"'What is sweeter than honey?'

"'What is stronger than a lion?'

"'And what is worse than a wife you can't trust or friends like you?' Samson said. 'Don't worry, you'll get your prizes.'

"Down to Askelon, one of the Philistine cities, Samson went. He was going shopping, but without any money. Before he was through with a one-man sack of the town, he had killed thirty men and taken their new clothes to give to the groomsmen who had tricked him.

"He was still so angry when he got back with the clothes that he just left them for the men and kept on going back to his own parents' home. It was not until spring and summer work on the farm had calmed him down that he decided to go back to Timnah to see his new wife. That's when he got another surprise. It was the girl's father who met him at the door.

"'You? We thought you had abandoned her for good so we gave her in marriage to the best man from your wedding.'

"Samson's eyes blazed. But the father was thinking quickly.

“‘I’ll tell you what. You’ve seen her younger sister. She’s better looking than the older one. Everybody says she is. Take her. You can marry her instead.’

“Samson couldn’t trust himself to stand there any longer. As he turned away, he muttered ‘this time there won’t be any blame on me for what I do to these Philistines.’

“We don’t know where he got the idea. Maybe he saw a fox looking into a chicken coop. Anyway he caught three hundred foxes, tied them tail to tail and put a burning torch in each set of tails. Two by two he let them go into the ripe standing grain of the Philistines’ farms and olive orchards.

“Well, you know how much the Philistines cared for that! It didn’t take them long to find out who had done it, because Samson was not making any secret of it or why he was doing it. When they found out that Samson had done it because the father-in-law had given Samson’s bride to another man, they responded by burning both the father and daughter to death.

“Samson hadn’t wanted this revenge on the father-in-law to go quite that far, so now he had to avenge his in-laws. It seems that one of the problems with violence is that the retaliation always calls for retaliation which calls for more retaliation, etc. The wheel was turning now, and many people would be hurt before it stopped. Samson waded into a crowd of Philistines and started beating up everybody. A lot of them were dead before he got tired and headed for a cave at Etam to hide.

“Now, the Philistines couldn’t let that slaughter go unanswered but they knew by this time that they had better take a pretty large bunch when

they went after Samson's hide. The Philistines attacked the Hebrews who lived at Lehi in Judah, and the Hebrews didn't know why they were getting hit until the Philistines told them that Samson had angered them.

“‘Well, don't be hitting us because of something Samson did. We will be glad to show you where he is staying so you can deal with him personally.’ The Hebrews were saying that as far as they were concerned, Samson was expendable.

“‘If you really don't intend to fight for him, then you go down and bind him up and bring him to us,’ the Philistines said.

“‘That wasn't going to be any easy job, so three thousand men of Judah went together, a really large delegation but they wanted Samson to know they were in earnest. When they got there and told Samson why they had come, his attitude surprised them. He said, ‘If you boys will swear to me that you will not fall on me yourselves, I will let you tie me up and take me to the Philistines.’

“‘It was with a huge sigh of relief that the Hebrews agreed to that. They took two brand new ropes, tied Samson up, and carted him back to the enemy. In a field outside Lehi they dumped him on the ground and stood back while the Philistines converged on him from all sides. They didn't know that the sight of danger always roused the Spirit in Samson so that superhuman strength was his.

“‘He snapped those ropes as if they were threads, found the jawbone of an ass lying in the field, and flailing out with it, he killed a thousand of them.

“‘Many people have been led to observe that thousands have been put to sleep by the jawbone of an ass, but they were referring to boring and

foolish speakers and preachers. Samson's accomplishment was a physical one, a very physical one, and it made him mighty thirsty. So God opened up a spring right there in the field near Lehi for Samson to have a drink. The spring is still there to this day. The spring was also a good sign to the people of Judah that Samson was to be their 'judge,' and he held that duty and honor for the next twenty years.

"One day (chapter 16) Samson was far enough from home down in Gaza that he visited a house of prostitution. Word got around that he was in the house, and the Philistines of Gaza got a posse together and laid in wait for him all night at the city gate. Their plan was to get him when he came out the next morning. But about midnight they saw a sight that made them entirely rethink their plan to attack Samson.

"A big hulk of a man suddenly stood in the middle of the gate, reached out and pulled up both gate posts and the two gates, and started to walk off with them. For some reason, nobody stepped out in the road to tell him that he shouldn't be stealing their city property.

"We don't know about all his affairs with women, but one you have to hear about. He fell for a woman, a Philistine woman, named Delilah. It's not a name that any of our Hebrew families use for girls any more, and I'll tell you why."

The elder who was acting as "moderator" for the Convention broke in to say.

"It's getting mighty late. Perhaps we should continue this story tomorrow night."

"No. No. Let him go on," the whole group answered. "We want to hear the rest of the Samson

story tonight before we quit.”

With a nod of his head toward the speaker, the moderator sat down, and the story telling went on as if there had been no interruption at all.

“By now, Samson was feared by the Philistines, of course. And when they saw an opportunity to discover the secret of his strength they made their move. They went to Delilah with a proposition she couldn’t refuse. Eleven hundred pieces of silver from each one of the lords of the country . . . that’s more than she could even dream of counting . . . for worming the secret out of Samson! Money talked louder than love did to Delilah.

“That night she was nestling her head against his big chest and the moment seemed to be right for the first try.

“‘You are so big and strong, Sam darling. Where in the world do you get all your strength? I’ll bet there is some secret about how you could be tied up so that somebody could hold you.’

“‘You’re right, honey. You know, if somebody ever tied me up with seven new bowstrings that had never been dried, I would be so weak that I wouldn’t be any stronger than your average man. Of course, I don’t know who wants to try to put the bowstrings on me.’

“Well, Delilah knew who was going to tie him up. All she had to do was wait until he went to sleep. When he fought, he fought hard; when he slept, Samson slept hard. It took an earthquake almost to wake him once he fell asleep. So she took the seven new bowstrings the Philistine men gave her, and the next night when Samson was sound asleep she tied him up with them.

“The men were in the next room waiting. When

she opened the door for them, she stood back and yelled, 'The Philistines are on you, Samson.' She almost hated to see them take him. But she needn't have worried. Samson rolled over, snapped those bowstrings like wet noodles, and the Philistines made exits in the walls of the house where none had been before.

"Delilah had her strengths, too. And one of them was persistence. A few nights later, she tried again.

"“You know, big boy, you told me a fib the other night. You told me that if somebody tied you up with seven new bowstrings that you couldn't get loose. But when those mean Philistine men tried that on you, you just snapped those strings like nothing. So I know you didn't tell me the truth. If this is going to be a good relationship we have to be able to trust each other, don't we? So why don't you just tell little Delilah the truth.”

"“O.K., I will,” Samson said with that nice sincere tone of voice. 'All anybody has to do is to tie me up with new ropes that have never been used before.' Samson was hoping that nobody had checked out the story of when the men of Judah bound him with brand new ropes and dumped him for the Philistines near Lehi.

"Well, you men know how that came out, too. Delilah tried again with new ropes; the men came in to get him again; and Samson broke the ropes like thread and scared the daylights out of them all again.

"“Maybe the third time is the charm,' Delilah thought to herself. So once again she put on the hurt lover act, and Samson came up with another story:

"“Just take the seven locks of my long hair and

weave them together like a web and pin them, and I will be as weak as any sissy you ever saw.'

"But the third time was not Delilah's winner either. It was the same story all over again. Delilah fixes him up while he is asleep; the men come in on him; Samson tears everything loose, and the men tear out for home.

"She tried tears. She tried sweet talk. She tried the silent treatment. She tried everything that she as a woman knew to try, and finally the thing that did the trick was that she simply nagged the secret out of him.

"'I'd give anything,' he finally said, 'if you would just shut up and quit trying to get that secret out of me.' And she came right back, 'Well, if you'd give anything, then just tell me the truth. Then I'll know you really love me and I won't say another word about it.'

"That promise, to never say another word about it, was just so good to hear that Samson blurted it out:

"'A razor has never touched my hair. If my hair is cut, I really would be like any other man. My strength would be gone.'

"This time Delilah just knew that he had leveled with her, so when she told the Philistine lords to get ready again to take him she also told them that she wanted the money with them when they came. To make sure that nothing went wrong, she held him in her arms that night as he went to sleep. Then she signalled for a barber to come in and cut the locks of hair from his head. This time, when she hollered the same thing, 'The Philistines are upon you, Samson,' he jumped up again thinking that he would shake himself free as before. But he

could hardly get his head off her lap.

“His strength was gone, and the men had no trouble holding him. Now they struck back for all the times he had struck back at them. They gouged his eyes out, and took the blinded Samson to a prison in Gaza where he was chained to a mill and did an animal’s work in grinding grain.

“Delilah had her wealth, and the Philistine lords had the Hebrews once again paying tribute to them, afraid to cause any trouble now that their strong man leader was gone. There was nothing to worry about in Philistia.

“Some time later, at one of the big celebrations honoring their god, Dagon, the wine was flowing freely and somebody began to call, ‘Bring Samson, our prisoner, so that we can have some fun with him.’ The whole crowd picked up the request, and the head men sent down to the prison to have Samson brought out. When they saw him chained and being led by a boy, they made him the butt of their jokes. He posed no threat to them now, this man who had struck such fear into their hearts in the years before.

“However, they had only overlooked one detail. Samson’s hair had been growing back during his stay in prison. And they made only one mistake: they let him stand between the two large pillars that held up the main part of the building. It was a large hall where all the Philistine leaders were enjoying the party, with a roof top balcony for spectators. There were about three thousand of them enjoying the humiliation of the great Samson.

“In the din of all the shouting of insults and taunts, Samson asked the boy who served as his eyes to place his hands on the two pillars so that he

could lean there and rest a bit. And silently he prayed to God to give him strength just one more time. Suddenly he bowed his back and pulled with all his might on the two central pillars.

“‘Let me die with the Philistines,’ he shouted as the pillars began to buckle. And the whole building collapsed on the Philistines and on Samson. It was the final act of the Samson drama, and he brought down the house.”

“That does it,” the moderator exclaimed. “We have one or two items of business to attend to before the evening is over. And before we go we have to set the time and place for our next Old Timers’ Convention.”

On their way from the campfire circle, an old gentleman from Ephraim said to the man from the tribe of Dan, “we could have told them about the mess our people got into back in the days following Samson when there was no one in charge.”

“I’ll say,” said the Danite, “then at least everybody could leave the Convention with a good feeling about not having to live in the ‘good old days’ anymore.”

Somebody put the accounts in the written record anyway, and the sometimes gory details are found in chapters 17-21 of the book of *Judges*.

Anarchy

It seems that a man named Micah, in the hill country of Ephraim, inherited enough silver from his mother to have some religious images made so that he could set up a shrine in his own home. At first he had one of his own sons acting as priest for the family shrine, but a transient Levite, looking for a place to settle down, stopped by for a handout and stayed to be “priest” with a salary and expenses.

Now the story skips (chapter 18) to focus on the tribe of Dan, the only one of the twelve tribes who didn’t have a “homeland.” They had five picked men out scouting to see where they might take over some property without too big a fight. And these five came to this same Micah’s house. While they were there, the Levite house priest blessed them, for whatever it was worth. And while they were there they saw that their fighting men could easily take this part of Judah for their tribe.

So, they go back to the tribe, tell them how easy the invasion will be, and also they tell them about Micah’s home shrine and private Levite priest. When the six hundred man army got to Micah’s house they picked up his silver images and altar,

and they informed the Levite that he would now be their chaplain. Micah and his neighbors tried to stop them but when the men of Dan warned him that it would be better not to rile them up, Micah backed off and let them go with his stuff and his priest.

Armed now with an official altar and image and priest for their tribe, the men of Dan wiped out the peaceful city of Laish, rebuilt it, and called it "Dan," and settled in to stay.

Now that all the tribes had divided up the land, it seems that the Israelites had to take up fighting among themselves so as to keep in practice. Curious incidents would invoke warfare. One particular nasty and unusual incident takes all the rest of the book.

Another Levite in the hills of Ephraim had a concubine who got angry with him and went back to her father and mother in Bethlehem. After four months the Levite decided it wouldn't hurt him to go and speak kindly to her and ask her to come back. The girl's father was unusually glad to see him and was more than willing to send his daughter back. After a dinner party that lasted five days, the Levite and the young woman pulled out. That night they stopped in another Israelite town called Gibeah. Instead of friendly hospitality, they found that no one would even speak to them on the town square.

Finally an old man came through the square, on his way home from working in the fields. It turned out that he wasn't a native either, so he invited the couple home to spend the night.

"These people of the Benjamin tribe aren't very friendly, are they?" the Levite said after they were

settled in for the evening.

"No, they are not only unfriendly, most of them are about as low down as any bunch of pagans you would ever want to meet."

Almost on cue, there was a banging on the door, and a crowd of men of the city were outside demanding that the old man put his male guest out so they could do what they wanted with him. It was Sodom and Gomorrah all over again, only this time there were no angels of the Lord inside the house to strike the mob blind. The old man offered his own daughter and the Levite's concubine, but the mob wanted the man. Finally the Levite pushed his own woman out of the door and locked it behind her.

Savagely the rape-minded gang turned on her, abusing her all night. When the Levite opened the door just after daybreak, she was lying there motionless.

"Get up woman, we have to be going!" he ordered with all the tenderness of a rattlesnake. But she didn't answer. Without a tear he threw her body on one of the donkeys and went on home. Once inside his house, he took a knife and carved her body into twelve pieces. And he sent one piece, by their equivariant of parcel post, to each of the twelve tribes of Israel, with an attached account of what the men of Benjamin had done.

At Mizpah, four hundred thousand men came together ready to go up and take Gibeah apart for what they had done to a fellow Hebrew. First, they sent messengers to the other towns of Benjamin asking them to give up the men of Gibeah who had done the foul deed. But all the tribe of Benjamin rallied behind their kinsmen in Gibeah. All together, they came up with twenty-six thousand

fighters, including seven hundred “who could sling a stone at a hair and not miss” (20:16). By the way, all of the seven hundred were left-handed pitchers, the story adds.

With four hundred thousand against twenty-six thousand, the rest of Israel was overconfident. In fact, instead of everybody going to fight, they prayed about it and the Lord said that the men from Judah should attack first. The rest would follow up if need be.

Well, the men of Benjamin were not only low down and mean, they were great fighters as well. On the first day of battle, they killed twenty-two thousand of the big army. On the second day, they wiped out eighteen thousand more. Each night the leaders of Israel would go back to Bethel and weep and offer sacrifices and work up their courage to fight the next day.

While they were there the second night, somebody remembered:

“Hey, do you men recall the story of how Joshua took Ai after his first brigade was routed? Now that the Benjamin army thinks they can take us every day they just might be set up for that same strategy to work for us!”

They all agreed that it was worth a try. So the next morning they had part of their army hiding in the bushes behind Gibeah when the main force showed up again in the field in front of the town. Once again the fighters of Benjamin poured out of the city to attack with a fresh supply of stones and swords.

Just as in Joshua’s day, it worked. The unoccupied city was taken by the ambush army, and the Israelites in front who had pretended to retreat

turned back to join in smashing the outnumbered and surrounded men of Benjamin. After twenty-five thousand, one hundred of the twenty-six thousand, seven hundred were killed, the Benjaminites realized they were defeated. Only six hundred or so escaped to a rock cliffside called Rimmon. They holed up there for four months while their brother Israelites destroyed or stole all their people, livestock, and property.

Now that the tribe of Benjamin was defeated, the people of Israel began to feel sorry for them.

"It really is too bad that one of our twelve tribes should be nearly wiped out," they told each other.

"Yes, but we made an oath together when we met at Mizpah that no one of us shall give his daughter in marriage to any man of Benjamin. And you know that we Hebrews cannot break oaths! So how are the six hundred Benjamin men going to reproduce. That tribe is sunk."

"Wait a minute," said a man who was adept at finding loop holes in religious covenants. "We also swore another oath together when we were calling out the troops from all over Israel. We said that any man who did not respond to the draft call should be put to death. Didn't we say that?"

"Yes, we did," they all agreed.

"Well, who didn't come?"

All of a sudden the light dawned on the others. "Jabesh-gilead, nobody came from Jabesh-gilead."

Now, that was reason enough, apparently, to send twelve thousand of the best fighters to Jabesh-gilead with the orders to kill every male, and every child, and every woman except the unmarried girls. They did it with dispatch and came

back with four hundred virgin girls. Those poor boys from Benjamin would get them as a peace offering if they would just come out of the rocks at Rimmon.

But the four hundred girls were not enough to go around for the six hundred Benjamin men who needed wives. Some of the Israelites were beginning to wish now that they had counted more closely and saved a few Benjamin women when they were wiping out the former "enemy." What could they do, since they were now so greatly concerned for the surviving men of Benjamin?

Somebody came up with the solution:

"We have to keep the tribe going because the Lord wants 'Twelve Tribes of Israel,' not eleven. And we can't let any of them marry any Israelite girls of ours, because of our oath. So let's show the Benjamin men where they can capture some women."

"Every year at Shiloh, the residents of the area hold an annual celebration which includes a lot of dancing. Let the men hide near the field where the girls of the town go through their dance routine on the last night. They can rush out and each one grab a girl for his wife."

"Hold on!" somebody ventured. "It would be breaking the oath if they took those girls!"

"No, it wouldn't!" the idea man replied. "When the fathers and brothers come to keep their daughters from being taken, the Benjamin men can say 'you aren't giving them to us, so you aren't breaking your oath. We aren't taking them in battle, so there is no need to get angry.'"

Believe it or not, it worked. And the men of Benjamin, now furnished with new wives, started

repopulating and rebuilding their area.

That's the way *Judges* ends. And you sorta have the feeling that this kind of anarchy where nobody really was in charge was going to have to come to an end sometime, or Israel would be down the tube of history before it had accomplished anything it had been "chosen" for. As the "Chosen People" in the "Promised Land," they certainly had shown little promise so far.

Ruth

Daughter In-Law

Nobody gets killed. Nobody gets sexually abused. Nobody gets tricked or swindled. And not an angry word is spoken.

How could a story like that find its way into the Old Testament accounts we have been following?

More than that, how could a book about a woman, a non-Jewish, poor, foreign woman, interrupt that macho violence of the dozens of stories that formed early Hebrew history?

Deborah and Jael commanded armies and nailed tent pegs through the heads of enemy generals. Even the early great mothers of the faith like Sarah, Rebekah, and Rachel used cunning and trickery to accomplish their goals.

But Ruth was a gentle, honest, truthful, considerate, hard-working young woman from a land whose women earlier Hebrews were forbidden to marry. And the whole four-chapter story nestles like a pleasant oasis in a desert of tension and upheaval.

The last chapter of *Judges* features murder, kidnapping and deceit. The first verses of the First Book of *Samuel* describe the infighting of two

wives as one would torment the other. And, in between, the little book of *Ruth* reminds us that most H.B.s then, as now, were common working people who shared life's troubles and joys with each other as kindly as they knew how.

The setting is rural; the life is simple in *Ruth*.

Hard times and famine hit Bethlehem in the high country of Judah, so Elimelech moved with his wife, Naomi, and two sons, Mahlon and Chilion, to the east side of the Dead Sea valley to Moab. Elimelech died there and the two sons married Moabite young women, named Orpah and Ruth. The mother lived with them, and apparently furnished no "mother-in-law" problems for the two wives.

In fact, when both sons died after about ten years, the three women started out together to go back to Naomi's home in Bethlehem. But Naomi got to thinking about the situation:

"Selfish, that's what I'm being," she told the daughters-in-law. "I love you just as much as if you were my own daughters, and I want to live with you. But you must have lives of your own. So I'm going to say 'good bye' now, and you two go back to your parents' homes, marry again, and establish your own homes."

Then she kissed them both, and turned to go. But they held on to her and wouldn't let her leave.

"We are going with you. That's what we want to do."

Naomi laid it out even more plainly a second time:

"You would be changing countries; you would be changing gods; you would be away from all your home ties; and your chances for getting married

there would not be nearly so good as here in your own country.”

This time, Orpah admitted that Naomi was right, and after a tearful farewell she turned her back toward her home. But Ruth clung to Naomi like lint to socks just out of the dryer.

“Look, your sister-in-law has done the smart thing. You go after her, too,” Naomi advised.

“Oh, please,” Ruth whispered, “don’t ask me to leave you. Wherever you go I want to go. Wherever you make your home, that’s where I want to live, too. Your people will be my people. If they are like you they must be pretty nice. I will accept your God as my God.”

There wasn’t anything else to be said. So the two of them made the long journey back to Bethlehem. No sooner had they walked into town than the word spread through friends and relatives that Naomi was back.

There were tears of gladness at reunion, and tears of sadness as Naomi related her sad experiences.

One of Elimelech’s family was a wealthy man named Boaz, who had a good mind for farming profitably, and a good eye for beauty. His barley was ready for thrashing, and Ruth had joined the poor who gleaned the grain left when the reapers went through the fields. What she was able to gather would keep Naomi and her from starvation.

Boaz came out from town one day to check the harvest, and what he ended up checking out was Ruth.

“I noticed there is a new young woman among the gleaners,” he said to the foreman.

“I noticed that you noticed,” the foreman said.

“Who is she? I’ve never seen her before I don’t believe.”

“It’s the Moabite woman who came back with Naomi from Moab and she is some worker.”

He added. “She hasn’t taken a break all day.”

When Ruth got down to the end of the next row, Boaz happened to be down there checking the sheaves.

“I’ve been noticing how hard you are working, you must be getting thirsty. I’ve told my men to let you have some of their water. And, by the way, you don’t need to be bashful about going anywhere you want around my fields; I warned the young men not to bother you, or they would have to answer to me personally.”

“Oh, sir,” she replied, “how can I thank you? Why are you being so kind to me?” Maybe she really didn’t know.

“Listen, we have all heard about how much you have done for your mother-in-law, Naomi. And we want you to know that you are welcome in our country. Our God wants us to be kind to strangers.”

Well, at lunch time, Boaz saw that she was invited to eat with the crew. After lunch, Ruth went back to gleaning and discovered that sometimes the workers left whole bundles of grain for her to find. All told, she had about a bushel of barley grain, far beyond the dream of the average gleaner.

At home that night, Naomi was more than happy with the reception Ruth was getting, particularly when she discovered that it was her kinsman, Boaz, who was taking such good care of her.

“If you ask me, I’d suggest that you stay close to that man,” she advised.

Ruth did, and at the end of the barley harvest, when Boaz had moved his operation to the threshing floor, Naomi was ready with a little more specific advice.

“You have that one outfit that is cuter than heck; you look like a million dollars in it. Tonight, Ruth, dear, get yourself cleaned up, with your best perfume, and wear that dress over to the threshing floor. Give them time to finish eating and drinking. After supper they always spread out their sleeping bags and spend the night. You watch where Boaz lies down, and when everybody is settled, you go over and lie down and massage his feet for him.”

After eating well, and drinking too well, Boaz found a soft place at the end of the heap of grain, and rolled out his bed roll. He was soon asleep and didn't even notice when Ruth eased herself down at his feet.

Something woke him at midnight. Maybe it was Ruth's foot massage. Anyway, he was just a little startled to see a woman there. Not displeased, just startled.

“Who are you?” he asked into the dark.

‘Ruth,’ she whispered. ‘It's all right if you spread your bed roll over this way; I am kin to you and I am here to make you comfortable.’”

‘You don't know what a compliment that is, young woman,’ Boaz said. “I can't believe that you would pick me when there are so many young men who would jump at the chance to get to know you. But I'm not complaining one bit.”

Before the night was over, Boaz was trying to figure out how he could claim Ruth. Since he was a near kinsman of Naomi's daughter-in-law, there was a potential problem. According to their

custom, the man nearest in kinship would have the first claim on taking a widow in the family as his own wife. And there was one man who would have that first claim ahead of Boaz.

Just before dawn, Ruth sneaked out so that the other men wouldn't know that she had been with Boaz all night, and as she left a good idea came to Boaz.

Somehow Naomi knew that Boaz would not miss the opportunity of having a wife like Ruth, so she was confident, when Ruth showed her the present of extra grain Boaz had sent home with her, that he would make some move the next day.

She was right. Boaz went up to the city gate early in the morning. When the next-of-kin came by, Boaz flagged him down and asked him to meet with some elders as witnesses. He had a little business proposition he wanted to put to him. The man sat down; they rounded up ten elders of the city, a minimum city council, and Boaz came out with his proposition.

"Naomi is having to sell the land that her husband, Elimelech, owned. The law requires," he said to the kinsman, "that you have first crack at buying it. If you don't want it, I will be glad to buy it from Naomi myself."

"I'll take it," the man said. "It's a good piece of property."

Boaz had figured that he would say that. So he added a further piece of information. "By the way, the day you buy the field, you are also buying the woman named Ruth who came from Moab with Naomi, because she was the wife of Elimelech's son."

That put a new face on the deal. If the man

bought the land and took Ruth for another wife, and if Ruth bore a son, that land would later go to the son. This is the ace in the hole that Boaz held, because the other man didn't have enough property to be able to swing that kind of a deal without stretching his resources too far.

"In that case, Boaz, you had better take the property and the woman. I'm stepping out of the picture."

Boaz tried not to look too relieved as he took the sandal his kinsman held out to him as a public sign that he was passing the right to the property over to Boaz.

"All right, you men are all witnesses that I am this day buying Naomi's property, including Ruth, Mahlon's widow. I just want to make sure that Mahlon's name is carried on in his inheritance."

Of course, there wasn't a blind man sitting there in the council, and they had all seen Ruth. That's why they smiled when they replied, "Certainly. We are all impressed by your interest in that land!"

The next night Ruth didn't have to get up and go home. She was home. After the baby came, Ruth already had a built-in baby sitter. Nobody makes a more attentive nurse than a grandmother, and Naomi was the proudest one in town.

The child's name was Obed, later known to every Hebrew everywhere as the father of the great King David. It must have been quite a shock to the Hebrews who thought that God wanted the people of Israel to have absolutely no dealings with foreigners to read a story that makes a point of telling them that the grandmother of David was a foreigner from Moab.

In fact, Moses was reported in *Deuteronomy* 23:3

as commanding “no Ammonite or Moabite shall enter the assembly of the Lord; even *to the tenth generation*. None belonging to them shall enter the assembly of the Lord for ever.”

Strange the way God keeps H.B. reminded that all divisions made in the human family are artificial and childish!

I Samuel

A Prophet Is Born

If the book of *Ruth* is like a nice oasis after the rough country of *Joshua* and *Judges*, then *Samuel* is the other side of the place of peaceful interlude. From a story of good will we move immediately back into ill will. From peace we are thrust back into war, and from open handed dealing we move back into stories of intrigue and plotting.

By now the Hebrews had learned the obvious lesson that when they were obedient to God and kept their covenant they were a lot healthier and happier. When they disobeyed or forgot to put their allegiance to their God first, they had all kinds of trouble. This they had discovered. But they were still having trouble figuring out just what God wanted.

Does God deal only with certain chosen persons? Is God concerned only about the nation as a whole? When a leader goes against God's will, or what he or she thinks is God's will, then does everybody have to suffer? What about the individual H.B.? Does he/she have any direct dealings with God, or does a priest or king have to intercede? Does God really want some people to wipe out other people?

Is everything fair in love or war?

The answers would be slow in coming, and even slower in finding acceptance.

Meanwhile, the earnest reader of the Bible plows on through the history of the group of tribes that somehow kept their ties until they became one nation with a king and a national temple.

The first of the great “judges” and the introducer of the first king was a man for whom the next books of the *Bible* are named, Samuel. His story, like the story of the last great interpreter of the Old Covenant and the introducer of the New Covenant, begins with the story of his mother and her dream of what he would become.

The mother, Hannah, was in a tough family situation. She was one of two wives to a man named Elkanah. The other wife, Peninnah, was having children for him right and left, but Hannah remained childless. Elkanah loved Hannah anyway, but the producing wife never missed an opportunity to rub in the disgrace that was Hannah’s. Especially when the family went to make sacrifices at the altar of Shiloh, Peninnah and her sons and daughters, got all the attention and favors.

It made Hannah so sick she couldn’t eat, and she shed enough tears to float a battleship, but still she remained childless.

One year at Shiloh she was weeping and praying by herself. She was praying silently, but her lips were moving and the old priest, Eli, was watching. Finally he felt moved to upbraid her for coming into the shrine drunk.

“You shouldn’t come here after drinking too much,” he said. “I’ve been watching you, and you’ve got a problem.”

"I do have a problem," Hannah replied, "but it isn't what you think. I don't drink, and I'm not drunk. It may have seemed odd that my lips were moving but I wasn't making any sound, but I was praying in my heart."

"I'm sorry," Eli answered. "Go in peace, and I promise you that the God of Israel will answer whatever you are asking."

Hannah had been praying that if God would give her a son, she would dedicate that son to be a servant of the Lord all of his life. And now Hannah was sure that God would do it because she believed that Eli spoke for God.

Back home she was so radiantly happy and relaxed that she was able to become pregnant, much to Elkanah's delight as well as hers. She didn't go up to the shrine at Shiloh until the baby, Samuel, was a little boy. Then she made the trip with Elkanah's permission, taking with her all the things she needed for the religious sacrifice. When she went in she went up to Eli and said:

"Remember me? I'm the woman you thought was drunk one night because I was praying about a problem. Well, I was praying for a son, and I promised the Lord that I would dedicate that son to serve here with you. You said that my prayer would be answered, and it was. Here is the boy!"

"And a fine lad he is, too," Eli observed.

Inspired with the meaning of the moment, Hannah sang her prayer this time. Those words in chapter 2, the first ten verses, formed a beautiful model for the song one of her descendants named Mary would sing before the birth of her son, Jesus.

The boy learned how to do the little jobs around the shrine that old Eli needed to have done. Eli's

own sons, who were now the main priests, were glad to have some help for the old man because they were too selfish and greedy to care for anything except the profits they could rake off the sacrifice business.

They had a real strong-arm operation going, taking all the best parts of the offerings for themselves, even those that were supposed to be offered as burnt offerings to the Lord. They even molested the young women who worked on the premises. If Eli could have stopped them, he didn't, a fact he would live to regret. He did call them on the carpet once, warning them that they were on dangerous ground when they were deliberately flaunting their sin before God, but they would not listen.

The report of the evil doing of the two sons of Eli, Hophni and Phinehas, became so widespread that a prophet from somewhere out in the country came in to say, in effect, to Eli:

"You and your house have had it as far as God is concerned. Your family has made a mockery of the priesthood. Trouble is coming. There won't ever be such a thing as an old man in your household anymore because all your descendants will die violent deaths. And it is going to start with your two weasel sons, Hophni and Phinehas. Both of them will die soon on the same day."

Eli's reaction to the message was not recorded, but perhaps the old man, now practically blind, could already see that the boy, Samuel, would be favored by the Lord to take over his work.

Already the boy was becoming sensitive to God's Presence. One night Eli was in bed and Samuel was lying on his mat in the room where the ark of the covenant was resting. Samuel heard a voice calling

his name, "Samuel, Samuel."

"Here I am," the boy said as he hurried into Eli's room. "What do you want?"

"I didn't call you, son. Go back and lie down."

So Samuel went back to his place. He hadn't even closed his eyes before the voice called again, "Samuel, Samuel."

Once again, Samuel hurried in to see what Eli needed. And once again Eli said,

"No, I didn't call. You must be dreaming. Go and try to get some sleep."

A third time it happened. This time, when Samuel came into the room saying that he had heard a voice calling, Eli was wide awake and thinking.

"Go back again. And if the voice calls again, you say 'Speak, Lord, your servant hears.'"

Back on his sleeping mat, Samuel could hardly breathe, waiting with expectation as his ears strained to catch any sound. And it came:

"Samuel, Samuel."

"Speak, Lord, your servant hears."

"Listen carefully, because I don't like to repeat bad news. I am the Lord and I am about to do to Eli's household what the visiting prophet told him I would do. No sacrifice or offering that he can make will change my mind. It was his sons who disgraced my name, but he didn't do anything to stop them, so he bears the guilt along with them."

All the rest of the night, young Samuel lay there trying to figure out why the Lord told him instead of speaking directly to Eli. And also trying to decide what he was going to say to Eli himself the next morning.

He needn't have worried. The morning found Eli

opening the conversation himself and insisting that Samuel tell him truthfully everything the Lord had said. When Samuel did tell him, Eli's response was characteristic of the man of God,

"Let the Lord do what the Lord will!"

Now the scene shifts. The Israelites and the Philistines were fighting again. The first big battle the Israelites lost, with four thousand men killed in the fighting. To Israelite leaders that meant only one thing: the Lord had not been there with them. Maybe the sacred ark ought to be moved closer to the battlefield. Perhaps the battle was too far away from Shiloh for the Lord to take an active interest.

So they sent to Shiloh and had the ark brought down to their main camp. Along with the ark went the two scoundrel priests, the sons of Eli. But Samuel stayed at home. It turns out later that the first defeat was God's way of getting Hophni and Phinehas into position for execution.

Having their God in camp, the Israelite leaders thought, would make the superstitious Philistines so afraid that they would give up easily. Actually, it had the opposite effect.

"If their gods are going to be fighting with them, we will have to fight even harder. When their gods are with them, those boys don't take any prisoners. We may as well fight to the death rather than surrender." So the Philistines reasoned, and so they fought. In fact, they fought so well they defeated Israel again, captured the ark itself, and killed the two doomed sons of Eli.

The Lord's judgment against Eli's household was coming true. A runner from the defeated army ran the Hebrew marathon to Shiloh and brought news of the battle. Bad news travels fast,

sometimes faster than good news. The noise in the city roused old Eli, and the news bearer reached the elders seated at the Gate.

Eli spoke up. "How did it go, my son?"

"They slaughtered us," the runner said straight out. "Your two sons, Hophni and Phinehas, are both dead. And the ark of God was captured."

The news of the sons didn't shake him, but the news of the ark's capture stunned Eli so that he fell over backward, broke his neck and died. So ended Eli's chapter in Hebrew history, and Samuel's came into full bloom.

A Kingdom Coming

Meanwhile the ark was proving that it was able to take care of itself on its own. First, the victorious Philistines carted the ark to Ashdod and set it up in their temple right next to the idol of Dagon, their god. The next morning early visitors to the temple found Dagon's statue face downward before the ark.

"Evidently the workmen jostled it when they brought the captured ark in yesterday," they said. So they took Dagon and put him back in his place.

The next morning the same scene greeted them, only this time the statue of Dagon, prostrate before the ark, had lost its head and arms. They were lying on the threshold of the entrance.

"Something mighty strange is going on here," the temple attendants thought. "We had better not step on that threshold ever again because our god's head and arms have touched it. And some way we had better get that Hebrew ark out of here before worse things happen!"

By the time a council of the leaders of Philistia was called together, all kinds of bad luck were plaguing the citizens of Ashdod.

“Take it anywhere you want,” they told the leaders, “but we don’t want that ark in our city any more. It’s bad medicine.”

Gath was the next stop on the ark’s tour of the land. Things were even worse there. Tumors grew on everybody. On to Ekron the ark was carried, but the people rioted when they found out it was coming. They had heard about the calamity that accompanied it, and the tumors broke out as soon as the ark hit their area.

“Men, we have made one big mistake bringing that ark into our land,” one of the rulers said, speaking the mind of every leader assembled in a special council meeting.

“This is a religious affair. Let’s call in all our top priests and people who know witchcraft to ask them what ought to be done with this Hebrew menace.”

The priests were unanimous.

“Send it back to Israel. But don’t send it away empty. Send a guilt offering with it and maybe their God will take away the tumors and rats that have been following that ark around.”

“What kind of offering shall we send?” the leaders asked.

“Well, to make sure God knows what we want to be rid of, make golden images of tumors and mice, one tumor and one mouse for each of you five lords.”

“Any special shipping instructions?”

“You bet. Be careful that the ark isn’t opened. Put these gold images in a box beside the ark. Then build a brand new cart, and hitch it to two milk cows which have never had a yoke on them before. Find two with new calves, and take their calves

away from them. Put the ark and the box on the cart, and turn the cows loose.

“If the cart heads toward Israel, then we will know that it is Israel’s God who has done all this to us. If the cart heads another way, then we can suppose that all this misery came to us just by chance.”

They did all that with dispatch, and the cows started bellowing and moving with the cart . . . heading straight up the road toward the ark’s home country. The Philistine lords followed it all the way to the border, and breathed a big sigh of relief when it disappeared into the fields of Bethshemesh where the people were harvesting.

In the field of a man named Joshua the cows stopped to graze. Recognizing their lost treasure, the people wasted no time in making a sacrifice to the Lord. For wood, they tore up the cart. For sacrificial animals, they took the two cows. The ark and the box with the gold images, the local Levites set up on a great stone in Joshua’s field.

If you don’t believe that story, *I Samuel* 6:18 says, you can go there and still see the stone. That may be a little on the order of the man who tells you that the wind blew so hard at his place that an iron chain was standing straight out. And if you don’t believe it, he can show you a link of the chain.

Some of the local people got too curious. They opened the lid of the ark and looked in. Curiosity killed the cat, they say. And their curiosity killed them, seventy of them. If they had been familiar with the old Moses history, they would have known that anybody who makes a false move around that ark was asking for deadly trouble.

Like the Philistines on the other side of the

border, the people of Bethshemesh were anxious that the ark be lodged somewhere else, anywhere else. The people of Kiriathjearim were better at handling such things. They consecrated a priest named Eleazar to take charge of the ark properly, and they kept it for the next twenty years in a hilltop house belonging to a man named Abinadab.

All of Israel was celebrating the fact that the ancient ark had been returned, so Samuel took advantage of the renewed attention to Yahweh worship. He said,

“If you really are sincere now about worshipping our God, then put away all the other gods and images that you have collected from the other people around us. And when you have done that, we will have a national religious convocation at Mizpah.”

From all over the land, the Israelites gathered to worship. But, as far as the Philistine overlords were concerned, gathering that many people together could mean only one thing: the Israelites were getting ready to resume war with Philistia! So the Philistines marshalled their army and moved across the border toward Mizpah.

Celebration turned to consternation in the Hebrew camps. They pled with Samuel to implore the aid of the Lord. And as Samuel offered up a burnt offering and a prayerful plea for help, the Lord sent a thunder storm that rattled the Philistines so that they were no match for the Hebrew fighters who took advantage of their confusion. While they were at it, they took back some border cities lost to the Philistines in battles years before. And to mark the event, Samuel had a large stone set up near Mizpah which he called “Ebenezer,” which means “the Lord helped us.”

Samuel was now the big judge in the country. He walked a circuit each year from Bethel to Gilgal to Mizpah, and back to Ramah, his home. Anywhere he set up shop, the people came to him to have disputes settled and advice given. There was only one problem, Samuel couldn't live forever.

When he was up in years, he made his two sons, Joel and Abijah, judges in his place in the southern part of Judah. The sons were smart enough, but crooked. "They took bribes and perverted justice," the *Bible's* account says.

It didn't take long for the leaders of Israel to get enough of that, so they came together to confer with Samuel.

"We've been talking it over," they told Samuel. "You are getting old, and your sons are rotten judges. What we need is a king. All the other nations have kings. Why can't we have a king? How about appointing one for us?"

Samuel didn't like the sound of that. But before he answered he said, "I'll pray about it, and see what the Lord has to say." He found a private place and prayed:

"Lord, I guess they don't want me any more. Now they are asking for a king to rule them." But the Lord answered:

"Listen, Samuel, it isn't you they are rejecting; it is I. What they are doing to you now is just what this people has been doing to me ever since I brought them up out of the land of Egypt. They don't need any king but me, but I can never convince them. So you warn them about what a king will do to them if they set up this kingdom they are asking for."

Samuel called them back together and made a

super-plain speech on the subject of kings.

“You know what a king will do to you? He will take your sons and draft them into his army. He will take others and force them into labor battallions. He will even have your daughters regimented into civilian service. The whole nation will end up serving him; he won’t be serving the nation! There won’t be but two things that will be certain for you under a king: death and taxes, plenty of taxes.”

“But think of the security we would have! Our national defense will be strong and we will have Law and Order at home.” Missing Samuel’s warning completely, this was their reasoning. So Samuel went back to the Lord.

“O.K. if that’s what they want, that’s what they shall get,” the Lord told him. And the search for the first king of Israel was on.

“We Want Saul”

He stood out head and shoulders above the crowd. That wasn't just a figure of speech when they referred to a young man named Saul. It was a literal fact. And not only was he the tallest son of the tribe of Benjamin, Saul was the best looking. On top of that, he was from a wealthy family.

The search for a king was over before it started, actually, because God had looked the situation over and this was the Lord's pick. Saul didn't know it yet. Samuel didn't know it yet. Nobody knew it yet, but the decision had been made.

The range was not fenced in those days, and sometimes cattle and burros strayed from their own pasture. It happened to a band of burros from the “Lazy K,” a ranch owned by Saul's father, Kish. So Saul and one of the hired men were sent out to find them. They went so far and stayed so long without finding a trace of them, that Saul finally said to the man with him,

“If we are out any longer, my father is going to stop worrying about the burros and start worrying about us.”

“I know,” the other answered, “but we have

come this far and we are close to where a real prophet lives. They say that he can foretell anything, never misses."

"Well, I would like to see what he has to say, but we can't go to him without some gift. And we're even out of bread. I don't have a thing he would want," Saul complained.

"We are not completely out of luck," the hired man came back. "I have a fourth of a shekel in my pocket. Silver coins are always good for offerings."

"Then let's go," Saul said. And they went to look up Samuel.

As they were walking up a hill outside of town, they met some girls who were coming down the hill to draw water. From them they got the information that the prophet was just going into town to have the invocation at the big religious feast they were putting on at noon.

"If you hurry, you can catch him before he starts the ceremony," the girls said.

Saul and his companion practically broke into a run for the town gate, and just as they went through into the square they saw an imposing looking gentleman just inside the gate. In a hurry, and unlike most men who didn't have a map of the city, they stopped to ask directions.

"We're looking for the famous prophet, Samuel. Can you tell us where we might find him?"

The tall young man before him was asking him a question, but the voice of the Lord speaking inside Samuel was making a very definite statement:

"This is the one I was telling you about. I told you yesterday that I would send a man from the tribe of Benjamin today about this time. Don't waste any time. Take him up to the celebration and anoint

him as our first King of Israel!"

Samuel's heart was racing, but his voice was calm as he answered, "I am the one you are looking for. I'm just getting ready to go up to the altar on the hill and make the sacrifice that opens this feast day. You come along with me; it looks as if you men could use a good meal. Tomorrow morning you can go home, after we have had a little talk.

"By the way, the burros you are looking for have already been found and are back at the ranch."

There was a note of awe in Saul's voice when he responded. "Look, I am just a country boy from the least of the tribes of Israel, Benjamin. My family is a long way from being the top family even in our little tribe. Why would you honor me like this?"

All during the feast, Samuel showed him special favor after favor. Saul kept wondering what was going on. That evening he was given a cool place to sleep on the roof top of the house where Samuel was staying.

The next morning early, Samuel woke the two men and said, "I'll walk a little way with you because I know you want to get started for home without wasting any daylight."

When they came to the edge of the town, Samuel told Saul to have his man walk on ahead of them so that he could say something to Saul in private.

"We can sit right here on this park bench for a minute," Samuel suggested. So Saul sat down and looked up, and there was Samuel with a bottle of oil in his hand, the kind they use sometimes for honoring celebrities. Before he could think about it, the old prophet had poured it on his head, and was saying:

"Young man, the Lord God has appointed you to

be the king of Israel. God knows that you will be a leader that can hold off the enemies of Israel."

Saul had half risen from his seat, not knowing what to say or how to respond to an announcement like that.

"I know you don't know whether to believe me or not," Samuel said quickly. "But I will give you three signs you can look for on the way home. First, you will meet two men up at Zelzah, near Rachel's tomb. They will tell you that the lost burros have been found and that your father is now worrying about your safety.

"Second, near the oak at Tabor, you will meet three men who are going up to Gilgal to make sacrifices to God. One will be carrying three small goats; another will be carrying three loaves of bread; and a third one will be carrying a skin of wine. They will greet you and offer you two loaves of bread. Take them.

"And third, near Gibathelohim, where there is a garrison of Philistine troops, a band of religious charismatics will be coming from a camp meeting with harps, tambourines, flutes, and lyres. They will be singing and dancing and shouting. You will join them, because the spirit will make you aware that you are now a new man."

Saul was still speechless. So Samuel had time to add one more admonition.

"After these things happen to you today, you can make up your own mind as to whether the Lord is directing all this. I think you have sense enough to be convinced that you are the man God has anointed king. So this is what you should do if you accept. Go to Gilgal. It's on my circuit, and I will be there in seven days to lead religious ceremonies for

the people of that area. When I get there I will tell you what to do. Seven days, you got that?"

Saul had it straight. A strange feeling was coming over him as he turned to leave Samuel, a feeling of strength and power he had never known before.

The signs all happened just exactly as Samuel had predicted. They all amazed Saul, but the ecstatic speaking he did with the religious group set everybody in the area where he lived to talking.

"What in the world has come over Saul? Is Saul going to be a prophet now?"

Back home, Saul told the story about how Samuel had told them just what had happened to the burros. But he didn't say a word about the anointing. How is he going to explain a thing like that? And what proof did he have that he could show?

Meanwhile Samuel is setting the stage. At Mizpah, he told a standing-room-only congregation,

"You know I have long opposed the idea of having a king for our nation. God is the only king we need. God has never failed to save us from our calamities and distresses. But since you insist that you want to be just like other nations, God is having me appoint a king for you. (Applause.)

"Here is the way we will find out who the Lord wants. Line up, tribe by tribe, and pass by the altar. I'll cast lots to see what tribe God picks."

So they came by, tribe after tribe, and the lot fell on the tribe of Benjamin. We don't know how many times Samuel had to flip the coin till Benjamin came up, but since he knew already who was chosen we may be pardoned if we suspect that this lottery was rigged. Because, sure enough, when he had the families of the tribe of Benjamin come by,

the family which included Kish and his sons was chosen. And, of course, it finally got narrowed down to his man, Saul.

"We want Saul, we want Saul," the people chanted, waiting to see the man of the hour appear. But nobody could find him. Finally Samuel had to ask the Lord where the new king was, and the Lord told him that Saul was hiding over in the wagons. Whether he was humble or afraid, we don't know. But they forced him to come out and take a bow on the platform, and he made a striking appearance.

"Tall, dark, and handsome . . . just the qualities I like in my king," one woman whispered to another.

And the shouts rang out, "Long live the king! Long live the king!"

When Samuel got through outlining the duties of a king, both to the people and to Saul himself, the young monarch knew he had a job to do that no person could do. But he went home determined to give it a try.

(Now, you may be wondering: we thought that Samuel told Saul to go to Gilgal and wait seven days there until the old judge came through. What happened to that part of the story? Well, maybe this story of choosing the king at Mizpah got out of sequence, or maybe there was more than one story about how it happened, and the editors put them both in. That happens more than once in the *Bible* accounts. Who cares, really? They are both good stories, and we will surely get back to the "seven day wait at Gilgal" story before the book is finished.)

Saul and Jonathan

Saul's first big test came when the Ammonite army under a man named Nahash besieged an Israelite town. The people of the town, Jabesh, were willing to surrender and be subject to Nahash, but he wanted them to agree that he could gouge out the right eye of every male to show all Israel his contempt for them. The inhabitants of Jabesh were naturally reluctant to agree to that without a last ditch try to find aid.

The Ammonites gave them seven days to surrender under their terms, or they would attack and sack the town. It was only a matter of hours until the sad news was out, and the people were weeping everywhere.

"What is the matter with all these people crying?" Saul asked when he was coming in from his field with his team of oxen. They told him. Saul was filled with fury and moved with a sense of duty. He took his yoke of oxen and cut them into pieces, and he sent a piece of butchered animal to every part of Israel. With the meat went the message, "This is what will happen to your oxen if you don't drop what you are doing and join Saul

and Samuel in fighting the Ammonites.”

It was a very effective summons. Three hundred and thirty thousand men showed up at a place called Bezek. And Saul sent word to the beleaguered city of Jabesh, “By tomorrow morning, we will be there to raise the siege.”

The seven-day grace period was up, so the elders of Jabesh sent word to Nahash that the next day they would be ready to give up without a fight. Early in the morning, Saul’s men fell on the Ammonites from three directions and completely routed the invaders.

Two things were accomplished by Saul’s bold action: the people of Jabesh were saved, and the new king had proved that he was an able leader. And old Samuel never missed an opportunity to strike while the iron was hot. He called everyone together at Gilgal and renewed the anointing of Saul as king of the nation. With the anointing he made another speech.

First, he challenged anybody to question his integrity as a prophet of the Lord. When no challenge came, he moved into a summary of what the Lord had done for Israel since the exodus from Egypt. Then he added this advice:

“You wanted a king; now God has given you a king. It’s a dangerous move, but if you will serve the Lord and keep God’s commandments, and if the king will also serve the Lord and keep God’s commandments, things will be all right. But, if you do not follow God and keep the commandments, then God will make it tough on you and the king.

“In case anyone thinks I am not speaking for the Lord in this, just stand still and watch. I am going to ask the Lord to send a thunderstorm and rain,

even though the skies are clear now and this is the dry season when we harvest wheat. God is still pretty put out that you want a king instead of trusting God alone as a ruler.”

When he finished speaking, the thunder rolled in the heavens as if God were applauding Samuel’s speech. Samuel had put the fear of the Lord in them, at least for a while.

Now Saul settled down to building his administration. He kept three thousand men as a permanent army, and set up a system for calling volunteers when trouble came. One third of his force, led by Saul’s son, Jonathan, wiped out a Philistine garrison at Geba. The uneasy truce between the two nations was broken, and both the Philistines and the Israelites prepared for war again.

While Saul was collecting his forces at Gilgal, the Philistines were marshalling at Michmash (that actually is the name of the place). There were so many of them that you couldn’t see the end of their camp, and the Israelites of that area were looking for places to hide.

Saul stayed at Gilgal for seven days waiting for Samuel. (Aha. Remember the story, back in chapter 10, when Samuel told Saul, who had not even been publicly announced as king, to go to Gilgal and wait seven days until Samuel came to tell him what to do? Well, we are back to square one.) Samuel doesn’t show up and the people are beginning to think that they are backing a loser. So Saul has to do something.

“I’m going to offer the burnt offering and the peace offering myself, because we have to have the favor of the Lord before we can go into battle.” So

Saul had the people gather the wood and the animals for sacrifice, and he did it.

No sooner had he finished than Samuel appeared.

"You fool," the old prophet said to the king, "you broke the agreement. So the Lord is going to appoint someone else to be king." With that he turned on his heel and left town again.

You can't blame Saul for getting somewhat confused about where he stood. One week the prophet is assuring him that God has picked him for sure to be king. The next week he is telling him that God is getting somebody else ready to take over. But either way the people are waiting right now for him to lead them against the Philistines.

When he counted them again, the crowd had dwindled to six hundred. Even they were poorly armed, because the Philistines had a corner on the iron goods market. There were no weapons makers or even plow makers in all Israel. The invading Philistine forces really had very little to fear.

Jonathan, and a young man who helped carry his armor, slipped out of camp without telling Saul, intent on picking a fight with a garrison of the enemy which was situated on top of a rocky bluff nearby. They showed themselves briefly below the cliff, and the Philistines above began to make fun of them.

"Well, look at that. The Hebrew rats are beginning to come out of their holes. I hope they don't come up here and wipe us out!" Big laugh.

And while they were throwing their taunts down, Jonathan and his man were climbing up. Once on top they fell on the jokesters who were still looking over the face of the rock, and before the echos of

their threats had died in the hills around, all twenty of the garrison were silenced forever.

All the Philistines below could see was the flash of swords and the bodies of their soldiers falling on the bluff. They were sure that the Hebrews had launched a major offensive. And when the Lord threw in an earthquake that shook their camps, their panic increased.

With or without Samuel, the time had come to strike. Saul seized the moment to order the ark brought to the head of his remaining six hundred. Believing that God would give them victory, no matter what the odds, the newly inspired Hebrews rushed to attack the panicked Philistines. The Philistines started to run and then all the other people of Israel who were hiding or who had already surrendered rose up with Philistine arms they picked up. The attack became a rout. All day the Hebrews were chasing and cutting up the Philistine army.

It was hard work and before the day was over, they were getting hungry. But for some unexplained reason, Saul had said, just before the attack,

“Cursed be the man who eats food before evening!”

They all heard it, and nobody was eating. Except that Jonathan had not been with them, and before anybody could stop him he scooped up some honey they found in the woods and ate it.

“Hey, this is pretty good. I needed some quick energy. Why aren’t the rest of you getting some to eat?”

“Because of your father’s oath,” one of them told Jonathan.

“What oath? What are you talking about?”

Then they told him about the curse his father had laid on anyone who ate before sundown.

"No wonder we aren't pressing our victory. They're getting away because everybody is too weak to fight. You all need a snack like this to give you some pep. My father's order was a bad mistake!"

Jonathan's little speech probably made them hungrier. By the time evening came, many of them were so famished that they killed animals and ate them before the blood was drained, which was a terrible sin for a good Hebrew. Word got to Saul, of course.

"We have to stop this sinning quickly," he said. "Spread the word that everyone is to bring the captured animals here where we have a big stone for slaughtering. We will do it kosher. This stone will be an altar."

After they had eaten their fill, Saul was all for making a night attack on the Philistines before they regrouped. However, a priest suggested that they ask the Lord first. Saul did inquire, but the Lord was silent.

"Oh, oh," Saul thought, "something is wrong here. Somebody has sinned and the Lord is angry with us."

They stayed in camp that night, and the next day Saul called the leaders of the people together.

"Somebody sinned yesterday. I don't know who, but I aim to find out. I don't care if it was Jonathan or even me, the man who sinned is going to die. Now who is going to do the honorable thing and tell me?"

Nobody said a word. The silence was deafening.

"All right, I'll find out anyway. We will take Urim

and Thummim stones. I will shake them up in the box and if both turn white side up, the Lord will be saying that the fault is in me or Jonathan. If both turn black side up, the fault will be in one of the people.

"Now, Lord, show us, so that we will know why you didn't answer when we wanted to follow the Philistines last night."

Both stones turned up white.

"That certainly narrows it down," said Saul uneasily. "We will cast the lots again between Jonathan and me." Jonathan lost.

"O.K., tell me what you have done," Saul demanded.

"I didn't know about your oath. I took some honey and ate it yesterday afternoon. So I guess you will have to kill me, father."

"By God, you will die," Saul shouted. Here was another in the line of Hebrew leaders who would rather kill people, even their own loved ones, than to break an oath. But this time the people wouldn't stand for it. They stood together as one person and said,

"Nobody touches a hair of Jonathan's head. We all know that Jonathan is responsible for this great victory. We aren't going to let you do it."

Saul was glad for a way out, so the matter was dropped, and everybody went home.

Mixed Signals

But it seems as if every time Saul and the people had a little peace time in which to catch their breath, old Samuel would come up with another enemy for them to fight. This time he had to dig way back into ancient history to find a foe, but he did it.

“Saul,” he said, “there’s a bit of unfinished business left over from the days of Moses. The Amalakites opposed Moses once, and the Lord wants them destroyed. And I mean God wants them destroyed, every man, woman, child, baby, sheep, ox, camel, everything.”

“Can’t we just let bygones be bygones?” Saul wondered (a thought which Paul was later to recommend highly). But Samuel insisted that if Saul were going to be the Lord’s choice for king he had better step lively and do the Lord’s bidding, as Samuel interpreted it.

So Saul called the people together again, ending up with two hundred and ten thousand soldiers, and they prepared to march against the Amalakites. Fortunately for the Kenites who lived among the Amalikes, Saul delayed long enough to

allow word to spread by the grapevine that the Kenites had better clear out, or else they would be killed along with the people of Amalak. The Kenites had befriended the Hebrews as they came out of Egypt with Moses and Joshua, so the people of Israel would pay off that debt, too.

Once the Kenites had all left the territory on urgent business, Saul's forces fell on the Amalakites and reverted to the old Moses and Joshua tactics of "holy war." They completely annihilated the people they found. They only kept one prisoner, the king, Agag. They also kept the best cattle and sheep. Everything else they destroyed and burned.

Does Samuel think God can rest easy now? Not for a minute! Samuel couldn't sleep at night after the news got back to him. It wasn't that his conscience was bothering him about the slaughter of women and children. He was bothered because Saul had left one person alive, and had also failed to kill all the animals. What could God do with such a wishy-washy king like that?

So Samuel was laying for Saul when he got back to Gilgal. Saul greeted Samuel first,

"Blessed be you in the Lord. You must be pretty happy now that I have done what the Lord commanded!"

"Well, what is that I hear? Sounds like a sheep bleating to me. No, maybe it is ox bellowing," Samuel answered.

"Yeah, that is what you hear," Saul said. "The people spared the very best of the Amalakite herds so that we could sacrifice them to your Lord. All the rest we destroyed, of course."

"All the rest we destroyed, of course," Samuel

repeated mockingly. "The Lord's command that I gave you was that you should destroy all. There shouldn't be any 'rest' to bring back."

"But we thought the Lord your God would like having the special sacrifice in Gilgal at your altar," Saul said again.

And here Samuel made a good point, one that later prophets made. He said that "God would rather have obedience than sacrifice." It is just unfortunate that the command the Lord wanted obeyed, according to Samuel, was probably less of what God really wanted than the kindlier human instincts of Saul and his people. And here Saul followed Adam, Eve, and so many others in that excuse that H.B. seems unable to shake:

"I am sorry I sinned, but the people pressured me and I gave in to their wish. It's not really my fault."

Samuel would hear none of it. "You have rejected the Lord's command, and the Lord has rejected you as king of Israel. That's final!"

The prophet turned to go, but Saul grabbed his cloak, and it tore in his hand.

"That's it," Samuel fairly shouted. "Just as you have torn my robe, the Lord has torn the kingdom from you today, and a better man is going to be chosen. And you needn't think that God is going to change that opinion."

"Well, at least stay and lead the worship service. I and all the leaders of the nation are here waiting to worship with you." Saul probably wouldn't have insisted if he had known what Samuel's idea of an acceptable sacrifice would be that day.

"Bring Agag, the king of the Amalakites here to me," Samuel ordered.

And Agag came cheerfully, because the altar of God seemed to be a likely place for forgiveness and kindness to be shown. "Surely it is time for us to shake hands and forget the bitterness of the past," he said. But there was not even a hint of tenderness in Samuel's eyes, only the look of a man whose righteous indignation mistakes vengeance for justice.

"Your sword has made women childless. Now your mother is going to be without a son." And Samuel began to swing a long sword. Right before everyone's eyes, he hacked Agag to pieces in front of the altar.

That was the last act Saul saw Samuel perform. The old prophet went back to Ramah, and Saul went, badly shaken, back to his own home in Gibeah.

Now we have only one story left to tell about Samuel, here in the sixteenth chapter of *I Samuel*. Fortunately, it is a nicer one. It would have been unfortunate to have the murder of Agag as the last thing we remember about the son of Hannah, the sensitive lad in the tabernacle, the prophet who honestly sought to follow God's will.

What seemed to happen to Samuel might be a lesson all of us Human Beings should note. If a person gets more and more zealous about being obedient to God, he or she might develop more capacity for violence as a means of wiping out the opposition. It happened to Moses and Joshua; it happened to Samuel. A person who is zealous must always be careful lest he or she become a zealot.

Perhaps what we must always look for in a leader, as he or she ages, is a love for people, a tenderness and concern for people. The properly

maturing leader learns across the years that we don't have to be so protective of God. God can take care of self. The great concern for God gradually becomes a constant concern for what God cares about—persons, and the living Creation!

It's a lot nicer to picture the old prophet with his vial of oil, seeking out some young person to anoint as the hope of the future. And this last story gives us that picture again. Having now rejected Saul, the Lord sends Samuel to the home of Jesse in Bethlehem. One of Jesse's sons is to be the new king. But how will Samuel make the trip and get the job done without letting the secret out?

The Lord suggests that he take a heifer along, and say that he is going to make a sacrifice. That's what he does. But even so, his reputation having preceded him, the elders of Bethlehem are worried about the trouble he may cause. And they are greatly relieved when he says that he comes peaceably to make a sacrifice with them.

Among those at the service are Jesse and his sons. One of them, Eliab, caught Samuel's eye immediately. He thought the Lord would go for another tall, handsome fellow like Saul.

"I'm not looking on the outward appearance this time," the Lord said. "I am looking at the heart." So Samuel asked Jesse to introduce him to the second son, Abinadab. But this one didn't get the Lord's o.k. either. The same was true with Sham-mah, and on down through all seven sons.

"That's funny," Samuel said to Jesse. "I'm sure the Lord wants me to pick one of your sons. Is this all you have?"

"No," Jesse said, "there is the youngest boy. He is out watching the sheep."

“I have to see him,” Samuel said. “Can you call him so I can meet him?”

Jesse had a servant go out to call David. As soon as the ruggedly handsome lad, blue eyed and red headed, came into the room, Samuel knew that this was the one.

He got right up and anointed David with the oil. However, the reader has to bear in mind that the reigning king, Saul, was firmly convinced that he was still king. So David's new kingship was something like the Promised Land God gave to Abraham and his family. It still had to be fought for. It was a free gift, but it had to be bought and paid for, in both cases with blood, sweat and tears.

The Giant Killer

It may be that Saul grew up with an inferiority complex and perhaps tendencies toward other psychological problems. But Samuel's anointing and "un-anointing," if there is such a word, his trust and then distrust, his calling him to be holy and then commanding him to kill ruthlessly, was enough to drive any sensitive person up the wall.

Anyway, Saul had deepening periods of depression. The servants worried about him and, of course, about what he might do in those periods. They suggested once that he ask them to find someone who could play the lyre around the house, because "music hath charms."

Well, guess who the best musician around those parts happened to be? If you guessed David, Jesse's youngest son, you were right.

There are two stories about how David first got introduced to Saul and the royal house. This is the first one: David was brought in to play the lyre and soothe Saul when he was in a bad emotional state. Saul liked David immediately, and he persuaded Jesse to get somebody else to tend the sheep. He wanted David in his personal service.

The other story, in chapter 17, says that the Israelites and the Philistines were at it again. Both armies were drawn up for battle, but neither really anxious to start a wholesale war. So there they were, one army on one ridge, the other army on the other ridge, with a valley in between.

Then from the ranks of the Philistines stepped a fellow the Israelites didn't need binoculars to see. His name was Goliath and he was a big one. The Scripture account says that he stood six cubits and a span. You think that is big? Wait until you translate it into English. A cubit was 18 inches and a span about six. Six times 18 is 9 feet, plus 6 inches. So here is Goliath, 9 ft. 6 inches tall (eat your heart out, pro-basketball scouts). He was well armored on top of that, and his javelin, or spear, was like a lodgepole pine with an iron head on it.

And Goliath bellowed out an invitation to the Israelites. He said "no use to line up for battle. Let's just settle this thing like decent sportsmen. We will pick one man and you pick one." The Israelites could guess who their man would be. "We will have a fight right down here in the draw. Winner takes all: your man wins, we will be your servants. I win, you will be our servants."

Well, nobody stepped forward to volunteer from the Hebrew side.

Now the story flashes back to a hill near Bethlehem, and centers on a young boy named David, the youngest of eight sons in Jesse's family. The three older boys were in Saul's army and the kid was home tending sheep. And one day Jesse sent David to Saul's headquarters with some home baked bread and cookies for the older brothers, plus some good cheese for the commanding of-

ficers. The story is in no hurry because Goliath came out every day for 40 days and challenged them. People didn't rush into war in those days; they took their time.

As you might guess, the brothers were in that part of the army that was camped on the hill opposite Goliath and the Philistines. It just happened that as David got there to visit with them and bring them the goodies from home, big Goliath stepped out and made his daily speech. By then, King Saul had spread the word that whoever would take Goliath on and survive could have his daughter plus a lot of money to enjoy her on, but nobody was showing his head above the trenches.

David stood up and said "who is this big so and so? If he's asking for a fight, why doesn't somebody in our army oblige him?" His big brother, Eliab, tried to shut him up. But David kept asking.

Word got to Saul who sent for David. David told him that he would go take care of the big braggart himself. He said that he had killed both lions and bears which had come up to steal his sheep, and this Goliath just looked liked another big bear to him. Besides, he had a secret weapon, the favor of the Lord who would deliver him from the giant.

So Saul tried to dress David up in all the armor and equipment he could get on him. But David wasn't used to the stuff so he took all of it off, took his sling shot and shepherds staff and started down the hillside. When he got to the brook at the bottom he picked up five smooth stones and started up the other hill toward Goliath.

Goliath couldn't believe it. He cursed the Hebrews and yelled at David that he would eat him up. David is still coming as he says to Goliath,

“You come to me with a sword and spear, but I come to you in the name of the Lord of Hosts, the God of the armies of Israel, whom you have defied. The Lord has delivered you into my hand and I am going to strike you down and cut off your head so your big mouth will shut up.”

While he was talking, David was getting closer for a good clean shot with one of the rocks from the creek bottom. He whirled the sling and let it go . . . right between the eyes, the one place Goliath's armor didn't protect. Goliath went down so suddenly nobody could holler “timber.”

For all practical purposes the whole battle was over. The Philistines ran and the Israelites chased them all the way home. David got a commission in the army, a wife for future reference, and everybody congratulated him, thinking of what he did to Goliath after he knocked him out, by saying, “we always knew you would get a head.”

David also got a new friend, one who stuck to him as long as he lived. Jonathan, Saul's son, recognized David as a brother in spirit. He even gave David his own special armor and weapons, and David used them to good advantage. In fact, he was so successful in battle that the female singers, who came out to meet Saul and David as they were returning from a foray against the Philistines, came up with this couplet:

“Saul has slain his thousands,
And David his ten thousands.”

You know how popular that made David with Saul. Now he knew who the arch rival would be, and he was so jealous of David that it made him sick. The soothing music David was hired to play now had the opposite effect. Twice while David was

strumming the lyre, Saul tried to pin him to the wall with his spear. But both times David sprang out of the way, no doubt thinking that with friends like Saul, he didn't need any enemies.

Then Saul played another dirty trick on David. Having promised before the Goliath episode that he would give his daughter's hand in marriage to anyone who could handle the giant, he now reneged on his promise. David was led to think that the king's daughter, Merab, would be his bride, but at the last moment Saul married her off to a fellow named Adriel.

This was only part of the trick. Saul's younger daughter, Michal, loved David and was quite willing to step into the breach and marry David in her sister's place. Saul knew that David would like that arrangement, too, so he had a little plan.

"All I want for a wedding gift for this beautiful daughter," Saul passed the word, "is the foreskins of a hundred Philistine men."

A hundred to one ought to be too heavy odds even for a fighter like David, he figured. The Philistines would take care of David for him, and he wouldn't be held accountable for his death. He only forgot one thing: he never said David had to go alone. With his fighting men at his side, David had no trouble in killing two hundred, and he brought twice as many foreskins (the Hebrew way of scalping) to Saul.

So Saul had to go through with it, and Michal became David's wife, much to her delight. But Saul found no delight any longer in David. He planned to have his men kill him. However, he shouldn't have let Jonathan in on the planning, because Jonathan went straight to David with the news.

“My loving father is planning on doing you in,” he informed David. “So you’d better stay hidden somewhere until I can get him calmed down.”

The next day Jonathan had a chance to speak to Saul in private while they were out in a field together.

“David has been a big help to you so far. We have to admit that many of our victories over the Philistines have come because of that one man. Everybody would look upon it as a terrible sin if you had him killed!”

At the moment Saul was in his right mind, so he said, “You know, you are right. I swear that David will not be put to death, and you know how touchy we Hebrew leaders are about our oaths.”

There was a little respite for a while for David, but one day, after another battlefield victory had raised David another notch in the estimation of all the people, Saul cut loose with another spear. This time David not only dodged but he thought it was time to keep on going. Oaths don’t mean that much when the oath maker is insane, he figured. Sure enough, Saul sent men that night to David’s house to make sure he stayed there until morning when he would be executed.

Perhaps Michal had read the story about Rahab letting the two Hebrew spies down from a window to escape. Anyway, she came up with the same idea. She let David out of the window at night, and then she took a statue and put it in bed where David slept. She even dressed it in his clothes and put goat’s hair on top.

The next morning the Hebrew Gestapo came for David, and they encountered the king’s daughter who told them, “he is sick.” Back to Saul they went

with that message, and Saul sent them right back to Michal's house with the instruction, "bring him to see me in bed, if he is sick. He is a dead man anyway."

This time the men went in the room and discovered Michal's trick. Saul called Michal on the carpet for that, but she made him believe that David forced her to do it, saying that he would kill her if she didn't cooperate. Saul could believe that because that is the way he would operate.

Meanwhile David had time to get to Ramah and into Samuel's house. Samuel was a willing ally. Every time Saul sent men to get David, Samuel invited them in to a prayer and prophecy meeting and the men were converted. So Saul himself went to Ramah. The camp meeting was still going on when he walked in, and lo and behold, Saul himself began to shout and jump round in a frenzy. It didn't end until the next morning when he realized that he had stripped off all his clothes and had lain naked all night in the tabernacle. It was then that he also realized that David had left town for parts unknown while he was making a fool of himself.

Hide and Go Seek

Whether chapter 20 follows immediately we do not know, but some time later, after David had told Jonathan that Saul was trying to kill him, David was supposed to show up at a feast celebrating the new moon. There was no way he was going to attend, even though Jonathan was sure that his father had calmed down again. So they decided between them that David would stay in hiding while Jonathan told his father that David had asked to be excused so that he could go back to his home town for a special family gathering.

"That may hold him off for a day or two," David told Jonathan. "But what about the third day when I don't show up?"

"I think you are letting your fears get the best of you," Jonathan answered. "However, we can set up a signal so that you can be sure. I'll come out on the third day with my arrow-boy and take target practice. You know the field. Hide behind the stone heap at the far end of it. I will shoot three arrows and send the boy after them. If I yell at him, 'Over here, pick them up,' you will know that it is safe to come.

“If I yell, ‘Look, the arrows are out beyond you!’, then you had better take off. And good luck.”

The feast of the new moon came, and sure enough, Saul noticed that David’s place was empty, but he didn’t say anything. On the second day, he asked Jonathan,

“What’s the matter with David? He didn’t show up yesterday or today.”

“He asked me to let him be excused so that he could go to his family’s yearly sacrifice in Bethlehem,” Jonathan replied. “I took it upon myself to tell him that I was sure it would be all right with you.”

“You what?” Saul roared. “Don’t you know what you are doing? You are choosing this man instead of your own father. And as long as he lives this kingdom which will pass to you when I die is in danger. I want you to send and get him here; David has to die. Do you hear me?”

“Why, father?” Jonathan said, “why should he be put to death? What has he done to deserve it?”

Saul’s answer was in the form of a spear which narrowly missed Jonathan. And Jonathan didn’t need to have it put any plainer than that.

The next morning he was ready to put “Operation Bow and Arrow” into action. Out in the field he shot the three arrows, called out to the arrow-boy that they were out beyond him, and then sent the lad home with the weapons. After he had gone, David came out from behind the stone heap and the two embraced, and Jonathan told David he had better put plenty of distance between himself and Saul’s squads.

Now David would have to live by his wits until he could gather some backers of his own. When he

went into a town called Nob, the priest, Ahimelech, came out to meet him. He knew that something was wrong, so he asked,

“Why are you alone? Where are your men?”

David drew him aside and said confidentially,

“I’m working undercover. The king has sent me on a secret mission. I can’t tell anyone about it but I am on my way to meet with some picked agents not far from here.

“I need some supplies. Can you let me have five loaves of bread, or whatever you have to eat?”

The priest could answer that quickly. “The only bread we keep around here is the holy bread which is on the altar of the Lord. Your men have probably not kept themselves ceremonially clean today, and they may have defiled themselves by touching a woman, so they couldn’t eat holy bread. It would be a sin. I couldn’t give you that.”

“My men may not be ritually clean?” David asked in his most shocked voice. “These young men were all altar boys back home. They make sure their dishes are cleaned and blessed every day, and, as for women, it is one big rule in any expedition of mine, that no women are allowed in camp.”

Not wanting to push the matter any farther, the priest gave David the loaves of bread off the altar. Ahimelech would be too frightened to say anything about David’s visit there, and every thing would have been all right except for one slip-up. An Edomite, named Doeg, one of Saul’s personal servants, saw and heard the whole episode. He followed the two and saw the priest give David the sword of Goliath which had been behind the altar ever since David’s victory celebration.

David kept moving until he crossed the border

into Achish. Immediately he was recognized by people who told the king of Gath,

"We recognized David, the Hebrew commander that has wiped out more Philistines than their king, Saul!"

Well, we knew that David was a fighter, a lover, a musician and singer, but now he proves himself to be an impromptu actor of the first class. When the king's men came out to meet him, he snarled and foamed at the mouth, scratched at the city gates like a crazy cat, and made inhuman sounds instead of speech.

"Look," the king said, "don't I have enough crazy people around here? Run him out of town."

David was glad to run. When he got into the hill country near Bethlehem, he sent word to his brothers, and also to other men that he knew were discontent with Saul's rule. In no time, he had about four hundred tough men in camp with him.

Fearing that his family would be seized by Saul's squads, he slipped them into Moab where the king of Moab agreed to keep them safe. And then he followed the advice of a prophet named Gad who advised him to make his headquarters in the forest of Hereth in the hills of Judah.

Now flash back to Saul. He is under a shade tree at Gibeah, his home base, surrounded by a large group of his men.

"I want to know something," he said sarcastically. "Is David going to give every one of you fields and vineyards, or is he going to make captains and generals of you in his rebel army? Why are you all afraid to give me any information about the son of Jesse?"

They all just looked at their feet and shuffled un-

comfortably, but Doeg, the Edomite, saw his opportunity to gain favor with his boss.

"I saw David myself the other day."

"What did you say?" Saul demanded.

"I said that I saw David the other day. He was in Nob. I saw Ahimelech, the priest there, give David bread and also the sword of Goliath."

As soon as they could get to Nob, Saul's agents closed in on Ahimelech and all the other priests, plus Ahimelech's family. Saul would get the truth out of them one way or another.

"I know what you have done," Saul told Ahimelech. "You were seen plotting against me with David. You gave him bread and a sword."

Ahimelech played innocent. "Sure, why not? Who among our people is closer to you than David. I know he is the king's son-in-law and he's the captain of your body guard. Why wouldn't I be friendly with him and ask God's blessing on him? I've done it many times before."

Saul wasn't taken in at all. And his suspicious mind included them all.

"Kill him," Saul cried out. "Kill him and all his family. And kill all these other priests, too. The dirty criminals were all in it together!"

But the king's servants wouldn't do it. The priests didn't seem like criminals to them. So the king turned to Doeg, the informer.

"You do it. You've got the guts of a real man."

And Doeg took a sword and killed eighty five priests who offered no resistance at all. Then, his lust for power spurring him on, he led others of Saul's strongarm men to Nob and killed every living thing there.

Only one man escaped, a son of Ahimelech. He

got to David's camp with the news of the massacre. David blamed himself.

"I knew that day when I saw Doeg, the Edomite, there that this would get back to Saul. I should have known he might do something like this. You'd better stay with me now; we are both on Saul's hit list."

In the middle between the Philistines and the Hebrew armies was not really safe ground. Before long an incident pointed that up.

The Hebrews at Keilah were being robbed of their harvest and killed by Philistines. David's immediate reaction was to go and relieve his countrymen. But his companions said,

"Look, we are in enough trouble now with Saul's forces on our tails. Do we really want to get the Philistine army against us, too?"

David prayed about it, and he was sure that the Lord wanted them to go and help the people of Keilah. So he went. And they were successful. They routed the Philistine marauders, captured a lot of their goods and the cattle they used to pull their wagons. Of course, word of the battle spread all over the country.

Saul heard it and was elated.

"Finally we have him. He and his men are now in a city which is surrounded by walls. We will go to Keilah and trap him before he knows what is happening."

But David's intelligence service was better than Saul knew. Word got back to David before Saul's troops did.

"What are we going to do, Lord?" David asked, holding a sacred cloth which the son of Ahimelech had brought with him from Nob. "Can I trust the

people of Keilah not to surrender me to Saul?"

The answer came clearly. "Saul's army is coming. And you can trust the men of Keilah about as far as you can throw the city wall. They will give you up rather than have their city destroyed."

David could understand that. So he pulled his six hundred man force out of the town at once and headed for the hills. Saul heard that David had escaped, so he called off the expedition.

One of the few heartening things that happened to David in the next few weeks was that Jonathan somehow managed to find him. In their happy reunion, Jonathan assured David that even Saul knew that someday David would be king, and that Jonathan would be right there with him.

The reward money kept going up, and finally the people of Ziph, the region where David's men were camped, went to Saul with the news of his whereabouts. Saul complimented them for their loyalty and sent them back to spy out all the places where David might be.

Based on the information he got from them, Saul himself led his forces into the rugged area to hunt down David. Gradually the net tightened, until it looked certain that David's capture was imminent.

The Philistines did not deliberately aim to get Saul off David's back, we can be sure. But it just so happened that they timed an invasion of Israel perfectly. Just as Saul's men were on the other side of the very hill where David was hiding, word came to Saul that the Philistines had struck. Immediately he ordered his army back to protect the home front, and David's men were spared.

While Saul was gone, David moved his camp to the wild country of Engedi. Saul followed with

three thousand picked men. The country was rugged and the day was hot, so Saul found a cool cave and lay down to rest. In a few minutes he had dozed off, sound asleep.

It just so happened that David and some of his men were hiding in that very cave.

"Well, well," one of the men told David, "look what the Lord has provided! Take this sword and end your troubles right here."

So David took the sharp sword, and while the men watched, he stole up to the front of the cave where Saul was sleeping. Saul was his mortal enemy, but Saul was also his king. And there was an ingrained sense of loyalty that made David do what seemed to his men to be a foolish thing. He cut off part of Saul's shirt tail.

A few minutes later, Saul woke up. The noise he thought he had heard must have just been some animal in the cave. He stretched himself, picked up his spear and walked out of the cave to continue the search. As soon as he had gone a few steps from the mouth of the cave, David came out behind him.

"My lord the King!"

Saul jerked around to see David bowing before him.

"Why do you listen to the men who tell you that I am trying to hurt you? Do you realize that I could have killed you while you were asleep in this cave? My men wanted me to do it, but I will not raise my hand against the Lord's anointed.

"Look at this," David said. "Isn't this part of your shirt tail? That ought to prove to you that I wouldn't kill you even when I had you at my mercy."

There is nothing like a narrow escape to make a

person remorseful.

"I have to admit it. You, my son, are more righteous than I. This is the Lord's doing. I know now that you are meant to be the next king. Just promise me one thing, that when you get to be king you will not wipe out my family, the way new kings usually do."

David swore to Saul that he would spare his family.

And Saul, much relieved, and now tired of the whole affair, went home. But David knew that he had better stay out of Saul's way until the Lord provided the right time and place for him to take the crown.

Close Encounters

Chapter 25 is a story we don't want to miss, but first notice that chapter 26 has another version of the account of David sparing Saul's life. Maybe David did it twice for emphasis. Chapter 23, verse 19, places a hill called Hachilah south of Jeshimon. Chapter 26, verse 1, locates it east of Jeshimon. But we can certainly move a mountain in order to get another good story in.

Either way it is the same scenario. Saul and three thousand men are chasing David and his six hundred. David was scouting them while they were scouting for him. And he observed one evening that Saul was bedding down for the night, not far from Abner, the commander of the king's forces. They were in the center of the camp, with the soldiers camped all around them.

That evening, David and Joab's brother, Abishai, sneaked into camp without being challenged. They made it all the way to the place where Saul lay sleeping. Abishai whispered,

"You can pin him to the ground with one jab of his spear."

We already know David's attitude about doing

the king in. He just couldn't!

"We will just take his spear, and this water jug by his head, and get out of here," David said.

Once out of there, the two men climbed to the top of the ridge opposite the camp. David used his best sheep calling voice:

"Abner, Abner!" The hills picked up the echo. Torches were suddenly lit here and there in the camp.

"Abner, Abner! Answer me!"

"Who is yelling like this in the middle of the night?" Abner answered as loud as he could.

"Aren't you the big protector of the king? No. 1 man in the fighting forces of Israel? Who can compare with you and your trained men for security? You couldn't protect anything! The king ought to have you executed for allowing someone to get near enough to the king to kill him!"

"Big talk!" Abner replied. "Come and try it!"

"I've already done it," David yelled. "Why don't you check to see where Saul's spear is. And while you are looking for that, try to find the water jug that was right by his head!"

By now Saul is awake and he gets into the long distance conversation.

"That's you, David, isn't it?"

"Yes sir, and . . ."

Here they have essentially the same discussion that ended the story by the cave. Saul goes back home, and David stays out in the hills of Judah.

Now, back to chapter 25.

The death of Samuel only gets one verse, but it does remind us of the fact that the only man who could intimidate Saul was now gone. David's ally among the prophets was no longer there as a refuge.

Meanwhile, David is having a problem finding winter supplies for his volunteer army. He finds out about a man named Nabal, which means "Fool." It turns out that he was well named. It also turns out that he was rich. Nabal had three thousand sheep and a thousand goats, all of which were being sheared at pens at Carmel. In return for protection, from David and his own men, Nabal should have been willing to pay the ransom of enough meat to supply David's men. David sent him a message:

"You notice that none of your sheep are missing, and that none of your men have been harmed. In consideration for our protection for your flocks, I would like to borrow some supplies. We certainly wouldn't want to see anything happen to mess up your operation.

RSVP. David."

"All right. Here is my answer," Nabal told David's men. "Who are you to be making any demands on me? We just have enough bread and meat for ourselves. I'm not sending any of it out into the woods to folks I don't even know."

When the answer got back to David, he said to the men,

"No more Mr. Nice Guy stuff! Get your swords and buckle up."

Two hundred stayed with the baggage at camp, and four hundred tough ones went with him. They were out to nail Nabal's hide to the barn door, and he was so dumb that he didn't know that anything was wrong. But his wife, Abigail, who is described as "of good understanding and beautiful," understood that Nabal had invited total disaster with his put-down of David. As soon as she heard

about it from one of Nabal's workers, she packed a mule train with two hundred loaves of bread, two large skins of wine, five sheep already dressed and ready for cooking, bags of grain, raisins and figs.

She and the supplies headed for the hill from which David would come to attack Carmel. And they got there just in time. David and the men were crossing the trail just as she pulled into sight. They waited while she rode up, dismounted and bowed low to the ground before David.

"There's been a terrible mistake," she said. "I will take the blame for it. I know my husband is well named, Nabal, and I should have been there when your men came to request supplies. He may deserve to be killed, but I wouldn't want you to have the guilt of that murder hanging over you when you become king of Israel. And I know you will be; nobody can stop a big, strong, handsome man like you from getting what he wants. Perhaps you will remember me when you do win out. These little gifts for you and your men may remind you of my admiration."

To himself David said, "what a speech, and what a woman!" There was only one response he could make.

"I'll tell you the truth. I was planning on wiping out Nabal's whole operation, every man of them, but your wisdom has saved me from that. I accept your gift, and I assure you that nobody will bother you in any way, as long as I have anything to say about it."

When Abigail got back to the house, Nabal was having a drinking party as unconcerned as you please. So she didn't tell him anything until morning. After breakfast, she calmly related what David

had planned to do to him and his men. It was enough to give him a stroke! And it did. Ten days later he died.

When David heard about Nabal's demise, he said,

"Blessed be the name of the Lord. God killed the so-and-so before I had to. Also the Lord sure left one fine looking widow."

Being a man of action, David moved right in. He sent messengers to her to see how she felt about remarriage so soon after Nabal's funeral. And she did not send the messengers back with an answer. Instead she went with them. And that was that.

We don't know whether Abigail knew at the time that David was also wooing over in the valley of Jezreel. But he was successful there, too, and Ahinoam moved in as another wife at the same time. She may even have been glad of it, because it cut the work load in half. Both of them could help him get over any sorrow he may have felt when he heard the news that his wife, Michal, had been shifted over by her father Saul to another man named Palti.

The stalemate continued, and David decided that the safest place for him was, strange as it seems, in the land of the Philistines against whom he had often fought. That's what he did. But he didn't go alone. All the six hundred mercenary soldiers, plus their families, including David's two new wives, moved into Gath, and asked asylum of Achish, the son of the king of Gath. After he was settled, David asked Achish to give him and his folks the town of Ziklag.

"Of course, why didn't I think of that first?" Achish answered. It is pretty hard to turn down a

commander with six hundred fighting men when he makes a request. So David and company made the border town of Ziklag their headquarters for a little over a year.

The six hundred kept themselves in fighting trim by raiding neighbor states and tribes. They would go out on a raid and come back laden with loot. When Achish would ask where they went, David would tell him they had made a raid into part of the Hebrew territory. Nobody could ever check out his stories, because his men left no survivors in any of the raids.

David's strategy was plain. If he had the Philistine rulers thinking that he was fighting the Israelites, then they would naturally assume that he would never consider going back to side with the Hebrews if war came again between the Philistines and David's former people.

Sure enough, war did break out again. The Philistine forces lined up to go against Saul's army. And when Saul looked them over, he knew that he was in trouble. As he had done in an earlier day, he sought some direction from the Lord. But the Lord didn't give him the courtesy of an answer, either through the prophets, or the stones used for casting lots, or even in his dreams. Now he was getting desperate.

In spite of the fact that Saul himself had outlawed mediums and fortune tellers, Saul disguised himself and headed for Endor where there was a woman who was well known as a medium. At night, he and two companions went to her place.

"I want you to call up a spirit for me," he said.

"Much as I might like to," she answered, "I can't do it. You know that the king has made my trade il-

legal. What are you trying to do, trap me? I'm clean."

Things had taken a nasty turn for Saul. So he swore to her that, by God, nothing would be done to her if she would do him this favor.

"Whom shall I bring up for you?" she asked.

"Bring up Samuel for me," he answered.

She went to work with her crystal ball and soon she said she was bringing Samuel into focus. All of a sudden she realized who her visitor was.

"I knew it was trick. You are king Saul. Why did you deceive me?"

"Be quiet; don't be afraid. What do you see?"

"I see an old man coming up, and he is wrapped in a robe," she said to him.

Saul instinctively bowed, and he heard Samuel's voice saying, "why did you disturb me by bringing me here?"

Saul forgot the medium now. He answered directly.

"I am in big trouble. The Philistines are coming against me and I can't get any answer from the Lord at all. I hoped you would tell me what to do."

Samuel wasn't getting into that. "If the Lord has turned against you, what do you think I can do about it? I told you before that your days as king are numbered, and that the Lord is giving your kingdom to David. And you know why, too. You left king Agag alive, and saved some of the Amalakite animals instead of killing everything as the Lord commanded!"

(It does seem that there were a good many other charges that Samuel could have brought against Saul. It's too bad that the time Saul showed a little mercy was the action that was to be condemned.)

“Since I’m up, I may as well tell you that you will lose the battle tomorrow. In fact, by sundown, you and your sons will be down here with me in the land of the dead.”

End of conversation. And almost the end of Saul. He had been so worried that he hadn’t eaten anything all day or night, and now he was near fainting. But the medium of Endor was a good hostess. She and the two men got Saul up on a bed and while he rested, she fixed a tempting meal. His strength returned after eating, and before dawn, Saul and the two servants were on their way back to headquarters.

In chapter 29, the scene changes back to the Philistine side of the lines. There in the midst of the forces of Achish were David’s six hundred raiders.

“Wait just a minute,” one of the Philistine lords said. “What are these Hebrews doing here with our troops?”

Achish answered. “Don’t you recognize David, the rebel from Israel? He and his men have been in my territory for over a year. They are trustworthy.”

“Maybe so, but there is no way that we are going to let that outfit go into battle today. What would stop them from turning on us? Don’t be a fool, man. This David has been a worse enemy than Saul ever could be. Send him back to your place right now.” And that was the final word of the high commander.

When Achish told David the news, David had to act as if he were crushed. Inwardly he was breathing a sigh of relief. He still had the refuge of Achish, and he did not have to fight against his own people of Israel. The next morning Achish

wondered why David and his men seemed so cheerful as they sang their marching song as they headed back to their homes in Ziklag.

Three days later their song was turned to moans and curses. They came over the hill and looked down on the smoking ruins of Ziklag. Everything and everybody was gone. Among the captives were David's two wives, Ahinoam and Abigail.

All signs pointed to the Amalakites. The reader may remember that this was the group which Saul wiped out completely. Once again we are reminded to take the body count of ancient battles with a grain of salt.

"Shall I go after them?" David inquired of the Lord with the help of Abiathar, the lone priest survivor of Ahimelech's family. The answer was a foregone conclusion.

"Go get them; you will catch them and defeat them."

His men were greatly encouraged when David and the priest reported the Lord's decision, so they headed out to overtake the Amalakite raiders. The forced march, on top of the three-day march home, took its toll. By the time they came to Besor Creek, two hundred of them were too exhausted to go farther without a rest. So David left them behind with the baggage while he kept up the pursuit with the other four hundred.

A good distance from the creek, out in the desert, they came across an Egyptian who had not had any food or water for three days and nights. David saw that he was fed, and then he interrogated him.

"Who are you, and where are you from?"

"I am an Egyptian, but I have been a servant to an Amalakite. I got sick three days ago and

couldn't travel so my master left me here to die. They are hurrying to get away because they raided a Hebrew settlement and burned a place called Ziklag to the ground."

"Will you take me to the place they were headed for?"

"I will show you where they are if you will swear to me by your God that you will not kill me or turn me over to my master."

"Agreed," David said. "Now let's go. Time's a wasting."

Down in a valley the Amalakites were making their camping place the scene of celebration. They still had plenty of wine and food they had captured, and they didn't want any of it to spoil in the heat.

David didn't even have to order his men to attack as they came down the hill and fell on the camp. The only Amalakites who escaped that day were four hundred young men who had camels to ride.

Best of all, none of the women or children had been harmed, and not only did David recover their own stuff which the Amalakites had stolen, he also had all the Amalakite goods and cattle when he started home.

Back home by Besor Creek the two hundred welcomed everyone in the returning party. But there was bitterness among some of the tired men who had gone with David.

"When we are dividing up the spoils, these men who stayed behind shouldn't get anything except their wives and children back."

David heard what they were saying, and right then and there he made a decision that became the rule for all Hebrew military expeditions of the future:

“No, the people who work in the quartermaster corps behind the lines will share equally with the ones who actually fight in the battle.”

When they got back to camp again at Ziklag, David took the time to send presents to all the Hebrew elders of Judah, saying that they were getting part of the Amalakite spoils because he considered himself as their man. While David was involved in all this, the big battle between the Philistines and the Israelites took place. Samuel's ghost was right. Israel was routed; the sons of Saul were all killed in battle, including Jonathan; and Saul himself was hit with arrows.

Wounded, he begged his armor bearer to draw his sword and finish him before the enemy took him to “make sport” of him. But the armor bearer couldn't do it. However, Saul did, and when the armor bearer saw Saul commit suicide, he did too.

The next day the Philistines came to strip the valuables off the dead. When they came to Saul, they not only stripped off his armor, they cut off his head. The armor was put on exhibition in the temple of Ashtaroah. His body was fastened to the city wall of Bethshan, along with the bodies of his three sons.

All the people of Israel were experiencing the gloom of defeat, but some men of Jabesh in Gilead still had enough courage to go at night to Bethshan and steal away the bodies of their king and his sons. They cremated and buried their bones under a tamarisk tree in Jabesh.

Centuries later another courageous Hebrew, living in an occupied land, would observe that “they who take the sword shall perish by the sword.”

Saul was one of a long line of his ancestors who did.

II Samuel

David Moves In

David and his forces had only been home in Ziklag for two days. They had recovered all the stolen goods and then some from the Amalakites, and were feeling awfully glad that the Philistine lords had not allowed them to mix in the war with the Israelites.

Now, the second part of the book *Samuel* opens with news of the big battle. A man comes into town covered with dirt and looking well worn.

"Where did you come from, man?" David asked the traveler.

"I have just escaped from the camp of the Israelites," he answered.

"Tell me quick, how did the big battle go?" David wanted to know.

"It couldn't have been worse. Our armies were routed, and both Saul and Jonathan were killed."

Disbelieving, David pressed him, "how do you know that Saul and Jonathan were killed?"

"I just happened to be on Mt. Gilboa, and I saw Saul there, leaning on his spear. Their cavalry were all around. Saul looked around and saw me. He wanted to know who I was. So I told him, 'I am an

Amalakite, one of your servants.'

"'Come finish me off,' he begged. 'I'm wounded and can't last much longer.'

"I knew it would be an act of mercy, so I killed him. Then I took the crown from his head, and this bracelet that was on his arm, and I have brought them here to you. What's the matter, my Lord, I thought this would be good news to you!"

It wasn't. David and his men seemed to be devastated. They mourned and fasted all day until evening, weeping for Saul, for David's good friend, Jonathan, and for the defeated people of Israel.

Then David got back to the man who had brought the bad news.

"How is it that you were not afraid to kill the Lord's anointed king with your own hand? Since you testified yourself that you killed the king, you also deserve to die."

With that, David turned his back on him and ordered one of his men to kill the Amalakite. Which he did while David went to his tent to compose a song to lament the fact that the mighty had fallen.

Now there was more than sorrow on David's mind. There was the big question which he one day had hoped, yet somehow feared to face: should he go up to Judah and stake out his claim on the kingdom?

He inquired of the Lord.

"Certainly you should go up. I had Samuel anoint you for this."

'But what city shall I take as my headquarters?'" David wanted to know.

"Try Hebron," the Lord said.

The next day everyone was packing. The two wives were gathering up David's household

belongings, and the rest of the men and their families were making ready to move as well.

There is no note as to whether the rest of the people of little Ziklag were sad or glad to see them go, but the people of Hebron were basking in the limelight of having a man about to be anointed king in their midst. The elders from all over Judah came and the coronation ceremony took place without a hitch.

Immediately David got his Public Relations Department on the ball. His first public act was to thank the people of Jabesh-Gilead who had retrieved the bodies of Saul and his sons from the Philistines. He told them that he would be in their debt for that action, and that (in effect) he would appreciate the same loyalty they had shown to Saul, now that he was the king.

Well, actually, David was king in Judah. All the north country of Israel was recognizing another man as their king. The commander of Saul's army, Abner, had taken a surviving son of Saul, Ishbosheth, and set him up as king. The divided kingdom arrangement was tolerated for about two years, until a summit conference was arranged between Joab, David's commander of the army, and Abner. Actually, this was a "pool conference," the meeting being arranged at the pool of Gibeon.

Not trusting each other, Abner sat on one side of the pool and Joab on the other. To break the ice, Abner proposed that they enjoy a little jousting tournament (a sport much enjoyed later in the "Middle Ages" of Europe). Twelve men from each side met, and though it is hard to see how they could actually do it, they all killed each other. That proved to be the end of the conference which never

took place, because soldiers of both sides jumped into the free- for-all, and the battle spread.

By evening Joab and David's forces had the upper hand, and Abner was running for his life.

A young man named Asahel, one of Joab's brothers, was hot in pursuit of Abner. When Abner saw that Asahel was chasing him personally, he yelled back at him:

"Asahel, are you trying to get me?"

"You bet. I'm coming after you, and I'll get you, Abner."

"Take some other man for a trophy. If you catch up with me, I'll have to kill you. I don't want to kill Joab's brother."

But while he was calling out, Asahel was gaining on him with his sword raised for the strike. Suddenly Abner wheeled and thrust his spear into the onrushing Asahel. The force of his charge impaled him on Abner's spear.

Abner continued to run, and now Joab and another brother, Abishai, took up the pursuit. Before sundown a band of Benjaminites had joined Abner on a hilltop ready to make a last ditch stand.

Abner tried once more for a truce. He called down the hill to Joab.

"You can try to take us and there will be killing. Haven't you had enough for today? Let's stop this foolishness and go home. Hebrews shouldn't be fighting each other."

It made good sense at the moment to Joab who was so tired he had no desire to climb another hill. So everybody called off the battle and went home.

When they counted noses that night, Joab was missing nineteen men in addition to the twelve who had started the jousting tournament at the

pool of Gibeon. But the Abner men had lost three hundred and sixty.

The respite in the civil war was short lived. However, David found enough time to be home to have six sons, one with each of his six wives. In addition to Abigail and Ahinoam, he had picked up four others to assist with the development of his clan.

On the other side, one of Saul's concubines caught the eye of general Abner. Abner was as aggressive off the field as on. One of Saul's sons, Ishbosheth, called him on it.

"I hear that you have taken over one of my father's women."

Nothing makes a man more defensive than guilt. Abner drew himself up in his most offensive defensive posture and retorted:

"This is the thanks I get? I have kept you and your father's family from being taken over by David's forces, and you get worked up over some affair I'm supposed to be having with this woman? Well, that's it. I am going to let David win. The Lord wants him to be king over all the nation anyway."

Ishbosheth had more sense than to say anything else. Maybe Abner would not carry out that threat.

But Abner did follow through. He sent messengers to David at Hebron saying that he would be willing to deliver the northern states of Israel to David. David was agreeable, of course. But there was one condition he laid down.

"I will accept your offer to go over to our side, but I don't want to see your face until you have delivered Saul's daughter, Michal. If you can't bring her to me, then don't come."

At the same time, David sent the same message to Ishbosheth. He wanted Michal, or else. Ishbosheth wasted no time in getting his sister out of the house of the man to whom Saul had given her after David first took to the hills to escape. But her new husband, Paltiel, wouldn't give her up easily. He tagged along, crying, all the way up the road to Bahurim. Finally Abner turned to him and said,

"That's enough! Now, when I count to three, I don't want to see you here anymore. One . . . two . . ."

Paltiel never heard "three." He was out of ear-shot, on his way home.

Abner showed up at Hebron with twenty elders of Israel, and David threw a big feast for the delegation. The chef had done his job well, because after eating Abner made a speech in which he promised David that he would go home and get the northern states signed on the dotted line.

David was still all smiles when his own general, Joab, came back from the latest foray against the territory of Israel.

"What are you so happy about?" Joab asked David.

"Abner was just here, and he has promised to bring the northern states into the kingdom," David said.

"What? You had him in your hand here and let him get away? The scoundrel only wanted to check out our security. You know he can't be trusted!" Joab was extremely upset.

As soon as he had got out of David's sight, Joab sent his armed men to catch Abner and bring him back. They caught up with him at Sirah and per-

suaded him to return with them to Hebron. Without David's knowing anything about it, Joab met Abner and took him aside for a private chat.

"I owe you something," Joab told Abner. "I owe you something for my brother, Asahel. And here it is." With that he stuck a dagger in Abner's abdomen so that he could die as Asahel had died on Abner's spear.

David was beside himself when he heard about it.

"I want everybody to know that neither I nor my administration had anything to do with Abner's murder. Let the guilt be on Joab's house, and may the Lord see that some misfortune comes to the members of Joab's family forever!"

He ordered a state burial for Saul's commander-in-chief, and led the mourning himself with much public lament as Abner was buried in Hebron, David's capital city. The word spread all over the country that David was fasting and mourning because of Abner's death. And the people of the northern part of the nation told each other that David was not to blame for the assault on their military leader.

Saul's son, Ishbosheth, and other Israelite leaders could see the handwriting on the wall. With Abner's death, they knew that the civil war was over, and the rats began to desert the sinking ship of state. The Benjaminites who lived in Beeroth, fearing reprisal from David's troops, packed up and fled the country entirely. Two of their captains, Rechab and Bannah, sons of a man named Rinnon, had a scheme.

At noontime, when the heat of the day usually forced people to take a siesta, they made their way

to the house where Ishbosheth was taking a nap. While he slept, they slipped into his bedroom and killed him. When they left they took his head which they thought would be their ticket to safety.

All night they traveled with their grizzly trophy, and the next day they arrived at David's headquarters at Hebron.

"We have a present for the king," they told the sentries.

Inside, while David watched, they unwrapped the head of Ishbosheth and laid it before them. They smiled as they announced with a flourish:

"Here is the head of your enemy, the son of Saul, Ishbosheth. We have helped the Lord get revenge for you on the house of Saul."

There was no smile on David's face, however. His response was quiet and sharp as a rapier thrust.

"When a turncoat like you came to me to tell us that Saul and Jonathan had been killed, he thought I would be pleased to give him a reward. I did give him the reward he deserved. I killed him. Now, how much more do you deserve that reward, murderers who sneaked into the house of a righteous man and killed him without giving him a chance for his life! So that is going to be your reward as well."

With a motion to his guards, David ordered their execution. In a matter of minutes, their bodies were hung on the wall near the main well, minus hands and feet. And the word spread that David was not pleased with any who would take revenge on the family of Saul.

"In fact," they pointed out, "he took the head of Saul's son, Ishbosheth, and buried it with honor in the same tomb with the body of Abner, Saul's general."

Israel Reunited

With their own leadership gone, the elders of the northern tribes now saw David as the only obvious choice for king of a united nation. His actions in connection with the murders of Abner and Ishbosheth had won the affection of the people. Now was the time to reunite. So they came, hat in hand, to Hebron for the coronation ceremony. And the ghost of old Samuel was probably watching to see if the anointing was done properly.

A nice tribute for an old man who had done all the things David had done? Not exactly. David was just thirty years of age when he went into the king business. For seven and a half years he had led the southern part of the territory Israel claimed with Headquarters in Hebron. Now he was king over all Israel, and he moved his capital to Jerusalem.

That move took more than simply lining up a van company. First there had to be another little military expedition to clear the title to his new address. It just happened that Jerusalem was not one of the Israelite cities. It belonged to the Jebusites, and they couldn't see any good reason why David should be able to announce that it would be his

new capital city. Even the "might makes right" theory didn't hold, they said.

"You'll never come in here," they told David. "This place is so well fortified that even the blind and the lame can hold it against your attack."

In response, David told his commandos that they could climb up into the city through the water aqueduct and show the Jebusites that he considered them all to be like blind and lame.

After David's men took it over, he fortified the city even more and settled in for a long rule there.

Neighboring Tyre recognized David's government immediately, sent ambassadors, and provided David with expert carpenters and builders to build a palace for a king.

Not having quite enough wives and concubines to fill the big new house, David had to take some additional ones from the new capital city, and with their cooperation he added more sons and daughters. Eleven of the new batch of boys are named (5:14). One of them was named Solomon, who would later rise to the top of the heap.

The news spread through Philistia, of course.

"Have you heard who the new king of Israel is? David!"

"Oh, oh, we're in for trouble now because that fellow is a fighter."

"He's full of ambition, too. He will never be content with the territory he has."

Talk led to action. The "preventive war" idea is not new. Military minded people have always approved the idea that it is best to strike back before you are struck in the first place. So the Philistines marshalled their forces for an attack on David.

"What do you think, Lord?" David asked in

prayer. "If I go out against them, will you give us the victory?"

"You shouldn't have had to ask," the Lord said. "Go get them."

The armies met at a place David later called "Baalperazim" which means "The Lord breaking through," because his army burst through the Philistines like a flood bursting through a levee. David thought it was significant that the fleeing Philistines left their idols on the field, because their gods were no match for Yahweh.

Still the Philistines persisted in coming back for more. This time when David asked the Lord how about it, the Lord gave him a suggestion. The Philistines were all lined up in the valley of Rephaim, and David was thinking of another frontal assault.

"Don't attack from the front this time," the Lord said. "Circle round to their backside, then come down through the balsam tree forest. When you hear the wind marching through the tops of the trees, you will know it is time to get going. I'll be going in the wind ahead of you."

It worked. The Bible story says that David "smote the Philistines from Geba to Gezer." And that's a lot of smiting.

Before David was through expanding his kingdom, the accounts of chapter 8 need to be added here instead of following chapter 7. In one campaign after another, David subdued the area that today is comprised of Jordan to the east and Syria to the north, then turned to occupy Edom and all the territory to the south, all the way to the gulf of Agaba and the Red Sea.

"All the metal articles, the bronze and silver and

gold,” David said, “will be stored in Jerusalem and dedicated to God. Someday they may be used in the Lord’s House.”

During all this time, Joab was commander-in-chief of the armies, but Benaiah was captain of David’s personal guard which was composed of Philistines. They wouldn’t be apt to take anybody’s side but David’s in case of rebellion among the Hebrews.

Remember the ark of the covenant? It had ended up in the house of a man named Abinadab on a hill of Baalejudah. Now David thought it should be enshrined in Jerusalem, the capital city. So he went with practically everybody in the country to bring the ark in a great procession.

Two sons of Abinadab, Uzzah and Ahio, came down the hill with the new cart on which the ark had been placed. Ahio was striding along before the cart while the bands played, and brother Uzzah walked proudly beside the ark, listening to the songs and shouts of David and all the people.

By one of the area threshing floors, the oxen stumbled and Uzzah instinctively reached out to steady the ark as the cart bounced. It was the last thing he ever did. He fell to the ground dead, and the people said,

“The Lord struck him down for touching the ark. He should have known that is what happens to anyone who does!”

David almost had a heart attack, too.

“Wait a minute,” he said. “I can’t take that thing home with me. I don’t mind saying that I am afraid of it.”

He meant it, too. Instead of having it taken into the city, David had the ark parked at the house of Obededom, a Gittite who lived just outside the city

walls. It was there for three months.

That wasn't where the Lord wanted the ark kept, however. God's plan for getting David to come back and get it was beautifully simple. The house of Obedom had so many good things happen to it in those three months that their new prosperity was the talk of the town.

Greed is a prime motivator often for H.B., David, or the rest of us.

David sent and had the ark moved on into the city. And he did it with a lot of show, including a dance into which he threw all the energy and moves he had.

Michal was inside the house, not having much fun herself, and she despised David for not displaying the dignity befitting a king. After David finished with all the ceremonies and offerings, the people all went home, and David wearily made his entrance into his house. Michal was ready.

"Well, well, how the king of Israel has honored himself today! He uncovers himself before the eyes of his servant maids and dances around without any shame at all!"

"That does it, Michal!" David said through clinched teeth. "I was dancing before the Lord; you know, the Lord of Israel who chose me over your father. And you haven't seen anything yet. You may not like the way I celebrate, but those maids you mentioned think I am doing all right. So just keep out of my way from now on. We're through!"

Through the months ahead, the ark of the Lord was always there reminding David of God's expectations. That's what Moses hoped it would do. And chapter seven opens with David confessing to Nathan, the prophet, that he felt uncomfortable having a wonderful cedar palace for himself while

the ark was parked in a tent. Nathan could see that the king was beginning to dream of a temple, the kind other nations had for their gods.

That night the Lord told Nathan what to say to king David.

“Tents have been fine for Me ever since I brought this people up out of Egypt. Did I ever mention to any of the judges or prophets along the way that I wasn’t satisfied with a tent?”

“Remind David that I took him from herding sheep to be king of Israel, and I have been with him everywhere he has gone. I intend to make Israel a settled and peaceful nation, and his house will be the royal house. But I’m not ready yet for a temple. I will deal with one of his sons who will succeed him to the throne about that.”

That’s what Nathan told David. And David immediately went into the tent before the ark and thanked God for saying that David’s house would be established through the years. Any additional blessings would also be appreciated, David told God.

Now that everything was going well, David mellowed a bit and began to wonder if there was anyone of the house of Saul left. If so, he, David, would do something nice for him or her in memory of his good friend, Jonathan. One of the servants in David’s palace had also worked for Saul in the old days. He told David,

“There is one left. He is a crippled son of Jonathan.”

“Where is he?” the king asked.

The man told him, and David sent for Jonathan’s son, a young man named Maphibosheth, and had him brought to Jerusalem.

"I can't believe it; I just can't believe it," Maphibosheth said when David told him the news. "You mean I am going to live here like one of your family?"

"Yes," David assured him, "and more than that I am restoring all of your father's land to you. A former servant of your father, Ziba, who told me about you, will be your chief servant now. He and all his sons and his servants will take care of your farm for you. Ziba is a man who knows how to produce. He has fifteen sons and twenty servants of his own."

Still mellow, David sent some of his court to visit the new king of Ammon. The new king was named Hanum, and his father, Nahash, had just died. Nahash had helped David in earlier struggles. David was sincere in wanting to help comfort the son, but Hanum's advisers thought that David's men had only come to spy out the city and see how best to attack it.

"I wouldn't trust those Hebrews farther than you can see with your eyes closed," the advisers told the young king. And not wanting to appear as a gullible young ruler, Hanum showed how tough and smart he could be. He had half of the beard shaved off each of David's men. Then he had half of each man's clothes cut off.

It was supposed to make them look ridiculous and funny, but David, for one, failed to find any humor in it.

When he came to his senses, young Hanum realized that Ammon could expect retaliation. He quickly hired thirty three thousand soldiers from Syria and the surrounding territory.

When the battle commenced, it looked for a time

as if the enlarged forces of Ammon would rout Joab and David's army.

"They're coming at us from both sides," Joab told his brother, Abishai, "I'll take our best troops and take on the Syrians; you keep the Ammonites off our backs."

A few hours later, the tide had turned. Joab's picked fighters had the Syrians on the run. And when the Ammonites saw that, they turned and retreated as well.

One thing led to another, of course, since war is a cancer that feeds on itself. Smarting from defeat, the Syrians called more army groups from other parts of Syria into the conflict. Seeing their increased mobilization, David gathered a larger army and set out to meet them.

Once again, Israel prevailed. David's army defeated them so badly that other nations which were lined up as vassal states of Syria now became subject to David. Ammon was now left alone to face Israel, and the next spring, David sent Joab and the army to the attack.

A Neighbor To Love

David himself stayed home, with time on his hands.

One afternoon, after he got up from a little nap, David was walking on the patio built on top of his house. Suddenly he stopped. In the yard of a neighbor house, a woman was taking a bath. And this was a very beautiful woman. David never looked at her twice; he never took his eyes off her the first time.

Without diverting his attention, David asked a servant, "Does anybody here know who that woman is?"

"I'm pretty sure that is Bathsheba, the wife of Uriah, the Hittite. Of course, I've never seen her without her clothes before."

It turns out that it might not have been a sheer accident that Bathsheba was bathing in just the right place to be seen at just the right time by the king. Because when David sent a messenger over to her house to invite her over to his house, she was all ready to go.

I will not attempt to supply any of the details that the *Bible* is not willing to provide. The story simply

says that she spent the night, and a few days later sent a message back to David:

"I am with child."

David didn't get where he was without being a quick thinker. He sent a message to Joab to have Uriah sent home immediately.

"How are things going at the front?" David asked Uriah when he was ushered into the king's room. There was a little small talk, with Uriah becoming more and more curious as to why the king was being so solicitous for his welfare. Then David broke off the conversation by saying,

"You're so near home now, why don't you just take the evening off and go spend it with your wife?"

Now there would be a logical father for the child to be born to Bathsheba about nine months later. Except for one thing—Uriah didn't go home that night! He spent the night in the barracks.

The next day, David asked Uriah why he didn't take advantage of the night at home away from the war. And poor old patriotic Uriah saluted the flag and said,

"The other men of the army are sleeping in tents. Even the ark of the Lord is in a tent. General Joab and the officers are sleeping in an open field; so should I go to my house to take it easy? I just can't do it."

"With all the regular army men in the country, why did I have to be dealing with this pure volunteer?" David asked himself. So he tried again. The next two nights he dined and wineed Uriah until he was intoxicated, but Uriah never went home to sleep with his wife.

"Well, I hope you've enjoyed the time off," David

said. "I know you are wanting to get back to the fighting now. So take this note to General Joab and be on your way."

Uriah didn't know he was carrying his own death warrant. In his hand was a letter from David to Joab that told Joab to see that Uriah was sent into the thick of the fighting and that he was to stay there until he was killed. David, man of honor, dancer before the Lord, would-be builder of temples, had now sunk lower than that snake in Eden, driven by personal guilt.

Before long another letter was on the way back from Joab to David. It described an abortive attempt to storm the city walls with a good many Israelite casualties. The messenger carried another note from Joab:

"When the king reads this report and gets upset because I should have known better than to let the men get so close to the fortified walls, tell him 'your good servant, Uriah the Hittite, is dead also.'"

Indeed, when David heard the news, the messenger was surprised at how well he took it. And the answer to Joab was not harsh at all:

"Don't feel badly about this little episode. After all, we are bound to lose a few good men now and then. Just keep up the attack and take that city!"

When Bathsheba heard the news of Uriah's death, she did all the lamenting that was necessary for her former husband. Then she accepted the kind, and not unexpected, invitation from the king that she move in with him. Now the son would be legally theirs.

God didn't like it. Again God sent Nathan, the prophet, to pay David a visit. They were having a spot of afternoon tea together when Nathan drop-

ped this story into the conversation:

“There were two men in a certain city. One was rich and the other was poor. The rich man had a good many flocks and herds; the poor man had nothing but one little ewe lamb. He had brought it up almost like one of the children. The family kept it in their house, and it would even drink out of his cup sometimes.

“One day a traveller came to the rich man’s home. The rich man was not willing to take an animal from his own flock or herd to prepare a meal for the visitor. So he took the one pet lamb from the poor man and killed it for the supper.”

David was instantly enraged.

“As the Lord lives, the man who did that deserves to die. And he should be made to restore that lamb fourfold! That man has no pity whatsoever!”

Nathan said to David quietly, “You are that man!”

David was speechless, so Nathan went on. “The Lord God says that because you had Uriah killed so that you, a rich man with many wives, could take his one wife, killing by the sword will always be a reality in your household. There will come a day when all your wives will be taken from you.

“The Lord will not take your own life, but the child you have conceived in this sinful manner will surely die.”

Nathan didn’t stay for cookies. He delivered his speech and turned on his heel. There wasn’t anything else to say.

Those words of Nathan haunted David after the child was born to Bathsheba. And when the child got sick, David knew the cause. For days he fasted

and prayed. For a week he lay on the ground in the tent where the ark was kept. He wouldn't eat and he wouldn't sleep.

On the seventh day, the child died, but the servants were afraid to tell him.

"I don't know how he will take the news," one of them said. "This might push him over the edge. He might even commit suicide!"

Suddenly they looked around with their hands over their mouths. They sensed that David had heard them whispering and had guessed the reason.

"The child is dead, isn't he?" David asked quietly.

They nodded their assent, and watched as he rose to his feet, not knowing what kind of outburst of emotion to expect.

David never said a word. He walked out of the tent, went to his house, bathed and shaved, put on clean clothes, and went back to the tabernacle tent to worship. Back home again, he sat down to the table and ate a good meal for the first time in a week. His family and friends couldn't contain their amazement any longer.

"What is this you have done? While the child was still alive, you fasted and wept, but when the child died you suddenly put all that aside!"

"While the child was alive," David replied calmly, "I fasted and prayed because there was some hope that the child might recover. But now that he is dead, there is no use to fast or pray about it. Can anything I do now bring him back? No. Someday I will join him beyond death, but he can't come back to me."

David spent much of the next few days giving his

comfort to Bathsheba. As a result of their time together, another son was born later, one they named Solomon. This one the Lord approved, and sent word through the prophet Nathan that another name for little Solomon should be Jedidiah, which means "beloved of the Lord."

Meanwhile the war with the Ammonites was still occupying the attention of Joab and the army. Joab sent a messenger to David saying that he had taken a part of the capital city of Rabbah which controlled the water supply. It was only a matter of time until the whole city had to capitulate, and he thought David himself should have the honor of leading the final assault.

David gathered more troops and marched off to finish the job. Along with all the other spoils of victory, David came by another crown. This one was not for every day wear around the house. It weighed 108 pounds of gold, with a large precious stone set in it. The people were put to work as slaves for the Hebrews, with plenty of time to reflect on the fact that they would all be free and prosperous if their young king had simply accepted king David's good will gesture of sympathy when the old king died.

Family Affairs

Tamar was her name. She was one of David's many children. And she was so beautiful that another one of David's children, a half brother to Tamar, fell madly in love with her. It almost killed him that he couldn't get her to pay any attention to him. Amnon moped around the house day after day until a close friend asked him,

"Hey, what's wrong? A son of the king ought to be on top of the world every day."

"You don't know what misery is, Jonadab. I am hopelessly in love with Tamar, the full sister of Absalom, and I can't do anything about it."

Now, Jonadab was a schemer, so he offered his cousin, Amnon, a little advice.

"I'll tell you what you ought to do. Pretend you are sick. Go to bed and wait. Your father will come to see how you are. Then tell him that you are too sick to eat anything. The only thing that appeals to you at all would be those special cookies that Tamar makes. And you want to see her there making them. You don't want any body else's cookies."

Amnon liked the sound of that, so he followed through and the plan worked. David asked Tamar

to go to Amnon's quarters and bake for him. Dutifully, she went. Right in front of his eyes she prepared them and set them before him. But Amnon couldn't eat any. Cookies were the last thing he had on his mind.

"I can't eat with people around," he said weakly. "Please have everybody leave."

Then, when they were alone, and Tamar came close with the cookies to try once again to get him to eat, he pulled her to him. His strength was remarkable for one so sick.

"Come lie with me!" he insisted.

"No, brother, it isn't right. Don't be a fool. We would both be ruined. Speak to father about it if you really want me for your wife."

Unfortunately, Amnon was too worked up to listen to reason. And since he was stronger, he had his way. No sooner had he finished than his great guilt feeling turned to hatred for the one he had violated. Then he tried to push her away, saying, "get up and go; get out of my sight!"

"Not so fast, brother. Sending me away now is worse than forcing me to be here. I'm not going," Tamar retorted.

It took Amnon and a servant to get Tamar out of the room. Once outside, she tore her clothes, put ashes on her head, and went around as if in mourning. Her brother, Absalom, took one look and guessed what had happened. He offered Tamar all the comfort he could, took her into his house to live, and outwardly made no fuss about the whole affair.

But in his heart he nursed a great hatred of Amnon.

Two years later Absalom was celebrating the end

of sheep shearing time on his part of the ranch. He invited the king and all the family to come out for a big barbecue. David knew that they would be in the men's way, so he thanked Absalom for the invitation but declined.

"Well, then, let all the boys go. They will be my guests."

That's the way it was. All of the other sons of David went out to the ranch with Absalom. The barbecue was as much drinking as eating, and Absalom let the word to his hired men:

"When Amnon gets too much to drink, kill him!"

The men couldn't believe they had heard what they had heard, but Absalom reminded them that he was paying them and this was part of the job he wanted done.

That evening they did it. Amnon fell, and all the other brothers leapt up and got out of the way as fast as they could, not knowing where Absalom would stop with the killing. Word traveled even faster than they did somehow. And the word that came to David was that all his sons had been killed by Absalom.

We can imagine his horror, and that of the whole court. But before they had a chance to do too much wailing, Amnon's cousin, Jonadab, came in to correct the news that only Amnon had been killed.

"Two years ago Amnon forced Tamar to lie with him and Absalom has waited all this time to get revenge. Amnon was the only one he planned to kill."

No sooner had Jonadab finished assuring uncle David that the others were safe than the whole outfit arrived, excited but unharmed.

Now, for the next three years, David mourned

not for Amnon, since he was dead, but for Absalom who had fled the country to nearby Geshur.

Joab, man of action, couldn't stand seeing the king waste his energy worrying about this one son. He devised a plan for getting Absalom back home.

"I need you to put on a little act for me," Joab told a talented woman from Tekoa. "I want you to put on mourning clothes and go to the king as if you have been mourning the dead for a long time. Here's what you say . . ."

Later, bowing before the king who was holding court one day, she began, "I am a widow. My husband is dead. I had two sons. They got in a quarrel out in the field and before the fight was over, one of them had killed the other.

"Now the whole family wants to take the surviving son and kill him, but then all my chances for an heir to my husband's name would be gone forever. Can you give an order that the killing stop right here, and my son be spared his life?"

"I can, and I will. If anyone touches your son to harm him, he will have to answer to me!"

That was David's firm commitment. He liked to make positive decisions like that, decisions that showed him to be a man of mercy.

"May I say one more thing, oh king?" the woman added.

"Of course."

"What about the king's own son? In giving this verdict to me just now, did you not say in effect that your banished son would be allowed to come home again? Does God want the banished son to be an outcast? And I know the Lord our God is with you to give you wisdom."

David smiled thoughtfully.

"I want you now to answer very truthfully what I am going to ask you. Will you do it?"

"I give you my word," she answered him.

"Is Joab behind this little appearance?"

"I said I would not lie. Yes, Joab is the one who put me up to it. But it is up to you to decide whether what I have said is right or wrong."

Joab, who was standing there beside the king, had not changed expressions during the entire interview. Now he turned to look at David who had turned to him.

"Go and bring Absalom back from Geshur," David said to Joab's immense relief.

Later, when Absalom returned, David ordered Joab to tell Absalom to stay out of his sight, even though he got all his own things back. That proved to be a mistake. It would have been much better for David if he had kept Absalom in his sight all the time.

After two years, Absalom had had enough of the silent treatment from his father. He sent a note to Joab to ask him to take him into the king's presence. Joab wouldn't go to see Absalom. He sent Joab another request. Still no answer.

"I'll get his attention," Absalom said to himself.

"Go out and set Joab's barley stack on fire," he said to one of his servants.

That brought Joab on the run. "Why did your men set my barley on fire?" Joab demanded as he stormed into Absalom's house.

"Forget that little fire," Absalom answered calmly.

"I had to get you over here just to ask one simple question, and I want an answer. Why did you bring me back from Geshur? I would be better off there.

Take me to the king, and if I am guilty in his eyes, let him put me to death. But I am sick and tired of playing this 'keep away' game!"

It worked. In no time Absalom was back in the king's favor, and was also in a position to gain favor from the people of Israel.

Absalom was never content to be Number Two. He always tried harder than any of the other sons to be Number One. He bought a chariot to ride around in, with horses like the royalty of other nations, not mules like his father rode. He paid fifty armed men to clear the way for him wherever he went.

While David was in the palace, Absalom was standing day after day by the city gate visiting with people who came in from all over Israel to present their claims before David. No matter what the case, Absalom assured them that he would certainly rule in their favor if he were doing the judging. By the time he got through visiting and shaking hands all around, Absalom, the politician, was gaining supporters for the day when he would make his move to take the throne!

In four years he had his organization together. One day he asked the king's permission to go to nearby Hebron, David's former capital, to fulfill a vow he had made while he was in Geshur.

Absolutely unaware of Absalom's scheme, David wished him a nice journey and sent him on his way. The scheme was simple. In Hebron, still a rival of Jerusalem, Absalom would proclaim himself the new king. At that moment, his agents throughout all Israel would rally people to his banner.

So Absalom left Jerusalem with two hundred

picked men, and others drifted over to Hebron after him. Even Ahithophel, one of David's trusted counselors, went with him. The bandwagon technique began to roll. By the hundreds the rank of the conspirators grew, preparing to storm the capital city.

Too late, the Intelligence agents got the word back to David. Too late to stop it, but not too late to make an escape from Jerusalem before Absalom's rebel forces got there. Leaving ten concubines behind to care for the palace, David took his family and most of the loyal people of Jerusalem and left town the same day he got the news of what Absalom was doing.

The Absalom Story

On the way out of town, David paused by the gates to see who all had come with him. He was surprised to see all of the six hundred Philistine guards he had hired in Gath. "I can't believe this," David said to the captain. "Why don't you stay here and work for the new king? You are a foreigner here and don't have to take sides. I can't offer you anything; I don't even know where I am going."

"No we are your men," Ittai, the captain answered. "We go where you go!"

There was a tear in David's eye as he watched the guard march past. And a great admiration for the courageous loyalty of the men, women and children who crossed the little Kidron brook that day and headed out into the wilderness with him.

At the very end of the procession came the Levites, led by Abiathar and Zadok, carrying the ark of the Lord.

"I want you to take the ark back," David told them. "It belongs in Jerusalem. If God is willing, I will be back to see it. If not, let God's will be done. Anyway, you can be of great help to me by staying

right here in the middle of things. You can get information to me that I will need." David was going up the steep road on the side of the Mount of Olives when someone told him,

"Ahithopel, the counselor, has thrown in with Absalom." Without breaking step, David looked to heaven and uttered one simple, heartfelt prayer,

"O Lord, I pray that You will turn the counsel of Ahithopel to foolishness."

Another one of the religious leaders of broad reputation offered to go with David also, but David talked Hushai into going back to Jerusalem to act as if he were siding with Ahithopel as a willing counselor for Absalom.

"You will be able to do two things there," David pointed out. "You can counterbalance some of the advice Ahithopel gives, and you can also pass along inside information to Abiathar and Zadok who can send it to me by their sons, Ahimaaz and Jonathan."

Hushai agreed, and got back into Jerusalem just before Absalom's forces arrived.

So many people did their part. The Bible story can only mention a few of them. One of them was the old servant, Ziba, who had brought Saul's grandson, Mephibosheth, to the palace. He showed up with two donkeys saddled and laden with two hundred loaves of bread plus all kinds of dried fruit.

"Ziba!" David exclaimed. "What are you doing here with these?"

"Well, the donkeys are for your household to take turns riding, and the bread and fruit are for the fighters to eat."

"It's a nice surprise to see you, and I thank you a

lot," David admitted. "But I don't see your master, Mephibosheth anywhere."

"No," Ziba replied. "He stayed to greet Absalom. He thinks he will be given the northern part of the kingdom again!" "Well if we get back into power, he will get nothing. Everything he owns I promise to you right now," David declared.

On the negative side, when David and his group got to Buhurim, a fellow named Shimei, a member of Saul's family, met them and started cursing David. He kept it up, following along the road, cursing all the time, and throwing rocks at David. "Ruin is what you deserve, you bloody usurper!" he yelled in his nicer moments. "I've heard about all of that I can stand," Abishai told David. "Let me go over and take his head off!"

"Just settle down," David cautioned. "If he is cursing me because the Lord told him to do it, who can complain? Anyway, my own son is trying to take my life; this man isn't going to worry me with his threats. Maybe the Lord will hear all this cursing I'm getting today and someday repay me with a little kindness," David added thoughtfully. So the man continued with them all the way down to the Jordan River, flinging dust and stones and cursing.

Back in Jerusalem, Absalom and his people found the city almost deserted. One of the few on hand to greet him was Hushai, David's friend. He was shouting as enthusiastically as any of them: "Long live the king! Long live the king!"

Absalom was surprised to see him there, and said so.

"I serve the Lord," Hushai told him. "Whoever the Lord and the people of Israel choose as king, I'm the king's man. I served your father, now why

shouldn't I serve you?"

"Well, what's the first thing I should do?" Absalom asked the distinguished counselor, Ahithophel. "Now that we are here, what's next?"

"There is one act you can do which will bring shame on your father and will make it clear to everyone that there is no chance of your allowing him to come back into power. Make a public display of taking your father's concubines for yourself." That was Ahithophel's advice. And that's what Absalom did.

"Now," said Ahithophel, "put twelve thousand men at my disposal, and I will start out tonight and catch David when he and his people are still tired and disorganized. I will only have to kill the king; the rest of the people will come back to you like a lost puppy coming home."

Fortunately for David, Absalom thought he ought to have the advice of Hushai as well. So he called him in.

"Ahithophel thinks we ought to follow David immediately and attack," Absalom told him. "What do you think?"

Hushai cleared this throat as if giving the idea some considerable thought. "Well, I don't like to disagree with a man of Ahithophel's standing, but this time I think he is wrong."

"Why so?" Absalom shot back.

"Simply because of what you already know about your father and many of the men with him. They are great fighters, the best in the world, and they are as mad as a she-bear which has just lost her cubs. Facing them now won't be easy. Besides, your father is an experienced warrior. He won't be staying in camp. Right now it's a good bet that he is

holed up somewhere in the country, ready to make a surprise attack on your people if they come after him. One quick victory on his part will throw fear into the ranks of all your men; they know David's reputation!"

"All right, what do you suggest then?" Absalom wanted to know.

"I'll tell you what I suggest. Gather all the troops you can get together from all over Israel. Then lead them in person. Don't turn it over to somebody else who will have the honor of defeating mighty David. Take your time and draw the net around him. With numbers we can take him anywhere in the country where he is found. Or if he holes up in a city, there will be time to take that city apart brick by brick."

With some nudging from the Lord who was answering David's prayer that Ahithophel's counsel be thwarted, Absalom and his key helpers decided that Hushai's advice was better. While they were still deciding, Hushai was wasting no time. He told the two priests that David should be warned to cross over the River Jordan and be ready for attack. The priests sent a maid to where the two sons were waiting to take the message, and the young man ran with it from there.

The only problem was that a boy saw them and he told Absalom. Knowing they had been discovered, Jonathan and Ahimaaz stopped at a house in nearby Bahurim. The owner helped them get down into his well, covered it up and scattered grain over it. They had hardly been hidden when Absalom's men arrived.

"Where are those two men?" they demanded of the woman in the yard.

"The last I saw of them they were crossing the

creek and heading that way," she pointed. And after searching the premises and finding nothing, Absalom's men returned to Jerusalem. The two young messengers came up when the coast was clear and hurried on to David's camp with the message. By the next daybreak, David and all his people were moved across the river to safety.

Never had Ahithophel faced a situation where his advice was not taken. He couldn't handle it. When he saw that Hushai's counsel was being followed instead of his own, he quietly saddled his donkey, rode home, put all of his affairs in order, and hanged himself!

By the time Absalom had gathered his entire following, David was ready to resist attack. Friends to whom David had extended a helping hand in the past now came to his camp with supplies and provisions of all kinds. The new volunteer army was organized: one third under Joab, a third under Abishai, and the other third under Ittai, the Philistine captain of David's personal guard. Their headquarters was in Mahanaim, and the three generals made David stay there instead of going with them to the field.

"You are worth ten thousand of us," they said. "It's you they want, not us. We can't afford to lose you."

David saluted them all as they moved out toward the forest of Ephraim where they met Absalom's men under Amasa, the general Absalom had picked to take Joab's place. The last thing anybody heard David say to the three generals as they left was this:

"Whatever happens, for my sake, deal gently with young Absalom."

Before the day was over Absalom's forces had suffered more than twenty thousand casualties in the rough country. At one point in the fighting, some of David's men came upon Absalom himself riding on his mule. The frightened animal bolted through thick underbrush and under an oak tree. Somehow Absalom's head got caught in the fork of a branch and he was left hanging there as the mule ran on.

One of the men who saw it came across Joab.

"I just saw Absalom hanging in an oak tree!"

"What, you saw him?" Joab exclaimed. "Why didn't you strike him down. I would have given you ten pieces of silver."

"No sir. Not even if I felt in my hand the weight of a thousand pieces of silver, I wouldn't raise my hand against the king's son. I heard him when he told you to protect the young man for his sake. If word had gotten back to king David that I had killed his son, my life wouldn't be worth two cents."

"We are wasting time talking like this," Joab interrupted. Straight to the tree where Absalom was caught, Joab ran. He took three daggers and stuck them into Absalom as he hung there. Then ten of Joab's men struck Absalom down and killed him.

That ended the battle. Joab sounded the bugle, and up and down the line David's commanders called off the pursuit. Before they returned to their base, they threw the body of Absalom into a deep pit and covered it with stones. His army disbanded and every man headed for his own home.

In that day news could travel only as fast as the fastest runner could carry it. Ahimaaz, Zadok's

son, wanted to be the one to take the news to David and the people back in Mahanaim.

"No," Joab said, "news of his son's death is not the kind of news you should carry. I'll send one of the Ethiopian servants." He nodded to one of the runners standing by and said, "Go tell the king what you have seen." And the man took off.

Still Ahimaaz renewed his plea. "Let me run also. I can't stand here. I have to run." And seeing that Ahimaaz was never going to be content with staying, Joab gave him permission to go also. The race was on.

David was sitting between the two gates of the city anxiously waiting for news when a watchman on the tower above him called down,

"I see a man running alone, heading this way."

"If he is running alone, he has news that can't wait," the king answered.

"Wait a minute. I see another man running, too, some distance behind the first one," the watchman yelled. "I think the runner in front looks like Ahimaaz."

"Ahimaaz is a good man. He will have good news," David said.

Ahimaaz sprinted up to the waiting king and the words came as fast as his steps had been. "We won. We won. Blessed be the Lord your God who has delivered you from the rebels!" Ahimaaz was bowed to the ground before the king, breathing hard. But David had only one question.

"What about Absalom? How is it with Absalom?"

"I don't know; there was so much going on . . ."

"Wait a minute. Maybe this next runner knows more."

Hardly had the Ethiopian blurted out the same news of victory when the king was asking him the same question, "How is it with Absalom?"

"May all the enemies of my lord the king end up like that one did!" the runner replied not knowing David's feelings.

There were no shouts of victory, no celebration. Through the silence of the yard below, the people later would hear the king's sorrowful lament:

"Oh my son, Absalom, my son, my son, Absalom! Would that I could have died instead of you, O Absalom, my son, my son!"

Everywhere a wet blanket was thrown over the desire to celebrate the victory. Nobody wanted to be whooping it up while the king was weeping. As the conquering soldiers returned, the news of David's mourning got to them and they ended up creeping back into town as if they had lost shamefully.

"That's enough of that!" Joab said when he heard about it. And he went straight to David's room. He barged right in.

"Look at you," he fairly shouted. "You are making the people who saved your life and the lives of your family and followers feel ashamed. You love those who hate you and hate those who love you. We are nothing to you, but Absalom is all you can think about. It looks as if you would really be pleased if he were alive today and all of us dead. A little more of this and we are all going to leave you."

David began to stiffen.

"I mean it," Joab continued. "Now get out there and welcome those troops and congratulate them for what they have done. You have always been a

great one for letting the dead rest in peace. Let's let the Absalom story be closed now, and get on with the future."

Joab was right, David knew. He stepped outside to his place by the city gate and the celebration began.

Settling Up

All over Israel the word spread. "King David was run out of the country, but the new king is dead now. So who is heading the government?"

"Let's bring David back. Think of all he did for us in the past. Who else is better?" There was talk and argument everywhere.

David knew that he would have to have strong support at home if he were to return to Jerusalem. So he sent word to his priest friends, Zadok and Abiathar: "Get the elders of Judah lined up for my homecoming. And tell Amasa, Absalom's commander-in-chief that I want him to stay on in place of Joab."

Once the ball started rolling, everyone joined in the call for David to return. There was an enormous crowd from Judah at Gilgal to greet David as he crossed the Jordan and began the ascent to Jerusalem. Leaders from all over the country fell all over themselves trying to let David know how happy they were that he was coming back to be king again.

Even Shimei. The last time David saw him, he was throwing dust and rocks and cursing David's

every step. Here he was begging for forgiveness, loud and long. Abishai still wanted to cut him down, but once again David intervened.

"Today is a day for rejoicing in Israel. We don't have to kill anybody to prove I am the king," David told Abishai. And to Sheimei he made the promise,

"You shall not die. I swear it. Now quit groveling!"

Now comes a turn to the story Ziba told David about Mephibosheth. As they were leaving Jerusalem, Ziba had said that his master, Saul's grandson, had thrown in his lot with Absalom. But when Mephibosheth meets David this day, it is obvious that he has not bathed or shaved or washed his clothes from the time David left until now.

"Why didn't you go with us, Mephibosheth?" David asked him.

"Because my servant, Ziba, tricked me. I asked him to saddle a mule for me, since I am crippled, so I could follow you. Instead he took it himself and left me stranded. Then, I understand he lied about me to you. But I don't have any right to cry to you about anything. You granted me a reprieve from death; you let me eat at your table every day. I've had more than my share."

"All right," David interrupted, "I've decided that you and Ziba will divide the land that was your father's."

"I don't care about any of it," Mephibosheth said. "Ziba can have it all. I'm just glad that you are back safe and sound."

The story leaves us there, wondering who lied, Ziba or Mephibosheth. And it picks up again at 19:31 with a wonderful little account of David's parting from an old friend, Barzillai. Literally, Bar-

zillai was an old friend. At eighty years of age, he was still in command of his fortune, and still able to be one of the chief providers for David and his people while they made their headquarters at Mahanaim, east of the Jordan. But when David invited him back to Jerusalem with him, Barzillai replied,

"Son, I'm too old to enjoy life at the court. I can hardly taste or hear. It will be a lot better for me to stay here where I am near to my family home and graveyard. But you can take along my servant, Chimham, and use him however you wish."

"I appreciate what you are saying," David said. "I'll treat Chimham as you would want me to, and anything I can ever do for you will be a pleasure."

Barzillai did go as far as the river crossing with David, then took his leave and returned to his home. His departure did not exactly leave David without company for the trip ahead. The story says that "all the people of Judah, and half the people of Israel went with him toward Jerusalem."

When the men of Israel saw that the men of Judah were giving David a bigger homecoming celebration than they were, they raised the question,

"Why do you folks feel that the king is your special possession? He belongs to us, too. In fact, there are ten tribes of us in Israel and only two of you in Judah."

"If you mean to imply that we get any special favors from the king, you are wrong," the Judah faction answered.

So the argument began. Reason was thrown to the wind, and before long the verbal tug-of-war erupted into another actual split of north and

south. A hot-head named Sheba, one of the tribe of Benjamin, persuaded the men of Israel to go with him while the people of Judah accompanied David all the way to Jerusalem.

“Well, we haven’t even gotten home from one revolution before we have another on our hands,” David told the new commander, Amasa. “Call the troops together, and be here yourself in three days ready to march.”

Amasa went out, but three days later he was not back and David was in no mood to wait until Sheba had time to recruit an army and set up in fortified cities. So Abishai, Joab, and the Philistine guards set out once more to fight for David. Along the way, Amasa, joined them, ready to take over the command which once had belonged to Joab. In a few minutes he was to discover that being appointed general by David and actually taking the command from Joab were two different things. It may be that David knew that, too.

Anyway, when Joab stepped up to greet Amasa, he said, “How are you doing today, brother?” But before Amasa could answer, Joab ran his sword through his body. And as he fell dead before them, Joab said softly, “Not so well, I see.”

Then without a backward glance, Joab said,

“I am going after Sheba. Is anybody going with me?”

The crowd hesitated around Amasa’s body, wondering what was the right thing to do, until one of Joab’s men dragged the body off the road and out of sight.

“Now,” he said, cinching up his own sword belt, “let’s get on down the road with Joab and Abishai!”

The road led finally to a town called Abel of Bethmaacah where Sheba and his followers were holed up. Joab's men succeeded in building a mound against it and were battering the wall with a huge log when all of a sudden, a woman's voice pierced through the noise.

"I want to talk with Joab. Tell Joab to come here!"

Everything stopped. Joab went over to the wall near the woman.

"Are you Joab?"

"I am."

"Will you listen to reason?"

"If I hear it."

"This town of Abel is one of the most famous historic towns of all Israel. This town is full of peaceable subjects of the king. Why are you tearing up part of our national heritage?"

"Wait a minute, woman," Joab put in. "I am not wanting to tear up anything. We have nothing against this town of yours. But a man named Sheba, from the hill country, is leading a revolt against king David. He's in your town. Give him up to us, and we will be gone from your town."

"You'll get his head before sundown, I promise you." No record ever said who the woman was, or how she talked the leaders of Abel into cooperating with Joab. But Sheba's head came over the wall that afternoon, and the revolt was over just that quick.

In a short while, the old party was back in power, and David's sway was absolute once again. As king, he was supposed to have the power to do anything, even stop the drought that brought actual famine to Israel for three years. David was

searching for an answer to the question of what sin had caused the Lord to send the famine. H.B. was later to learn that his/her morality or lack of it was not the only factor that determines the weather, but David was convinced that somebody had done something that the Lord didn't approve. And it was up to him to find out and correct it.

Finally he hit on the answer. He was sure that the Lord was punishing Israel because of an action Saul had taken years before. In a frantic effort to clear the area of "foreigners," Saul had wiped out many of a group of people to whom Joshua had promised safety forever, the Gibeonites.

That was it, David decided.

"What can I do for you now to take away this blood-guilt brought on Israel by Saul?" David asked the Gibeonite leaders. "What will you take for reparation?"

"This is not a matter that silver or gold can repay," they answered him. "It was the house of Saul that tried to wipe us out. Our revenge should be directed at them. Give us seven male descendants of Saul, and we will hang them up as an offering to the Lord at Gibeon."

David said that he would do it. He started looking around for Saul's family. An obvious choice was Saul's grandson, the son of Jonathan, Mephibosheth. But David had already taken an oath that he would never harm him. Finally he took two men who were sons of Saul himself and a concubine named Rizpah, and five sons of one of Saul's daughters named Merab.

The Gibeonites did just what they said they would do. They killed the seven and hung their bodies on top of the mountain at their shrine. And

when the lynch mob left the mountain, an uninvited guest remained, Rizpah, the mother of two of the slain. She stayed there day and night, keeping birds of prey and wild animals away from the bodies.

Her action not only touched David when he heard about it, it prompted an action from him. He went to the men of Jabesh-Gilead who had gone at night to steal away the bodies of both Saul and Jonathan from the Philistines who had killed them and hung their bodies in the public square of Bethshan.

"I appreciate your keeping the bones of Saul and Jonathan until we could give them a proper burial," David told them. "Now I have decided to give them a proper burial in the family cemetery of Saul's father." Then David took also the remains of the seven, ending Rizpah's vigil, and buried them all together in the tomb at Zela in the land of Benjamin.

Apparently God accepted all that as repentance enough and the rains came again. The famine was ended.

The famine ended, but war began again. The uneasy peace with the Philistines was broken. Once again the veteran king marched off to battle, but age was beginning to take its toll on his strength and stamina. Toward the end of a day of fighting, David was tired and a giant Philistine, whose spear was bigger than you would believe, was proving more than a match for David. Just in the nick of time, Abishai came to David's rescue and the giant was subdued.

"That was close, too close," Abishai and the other men with David said. "From now on, you

leave the fighting to us. We can't afford to risk losing you."

And if they were worried about David's penchant for being attacked by giants, they were right. The rest of chapter 21 lists three other Philistine giants who gave the men of Israel a lot of trouble before they were toppled. One of them even had six fingers on each hand and six toes on each foot. I am not sure how that would give him the edge in throwing or chopping, but people probably didn't tease him about it anyway.

A Time To Remember

Released from fighting, king David now had more time for composing songs. In chapter 22, he sings about how the Lord has delivered him from all kinds of enemies across the years. David was always sure, from boyhood on, that God is the prime mover in world affairs. He lived close enough to nature all his life to know that when you cooperate with the way the universe works, you get results. When you fail to cooperate you have to take the consequences. So when things turn out well, any H.B. should sing God's praise and thank God for enabling success.

However, it is one thing to acknowledge that God blesses us, at least in growth of character, when we do right, and another thing to turn that around and say that when God blesses us it must mean that we have done right.

It's simple, common error made by most religious people before David, including David, and after David: What God does for me is dependent upon *my* righteousness! David seems to miss here the obvious fact that Jesus and others later noted, that God "sends the rain on the just and the

unjust." So David writes:

"The Lord rewarded me according to my righteousness, according to the cleanness of my hands he recompensed me." (22:21) This is from the man who had a man killed so he could take his wife, etc. etc.

"I was blameless before God,
and kept myself from guilt.

Therefore the Lord has recompensed me according

ing
to my righteousness,
according to my cleanness in God's sight."
(22:24-25)

So David continues to heap praises on God for giving him strength. And he comes up with some beautiful images.

...strength and agility enough "to leap over a wall...to crush a troop." (verse 30)

...assurance enough to walk along his difficult path with "feet like hind's feet," secure in the heights because his back feet track exactly where his front feet step. (verse 34)

...strength enough that his "arms can bend a bow of bronze." (verse 35)

But why does God give him such strength and ability? So that he can kill his enemies! Again, a sensitive man very much aware that he owes his talent to God, but perhaps misreading God's intention for the use of that power.

"Thank you, God, for delivering me from my enemies"...yes. But "Thou didst make my enemies turn their backs to me...I crushed them and stamped them down like the mire of the streets..." (verses 41-43). We may well wonder about God's delight in that!

Perhaps our best clue to David's misreading of at least part of the divine will comes from Hebrew history in the centuries since David's time. If God did intend to back the Hebrew monarchy as established by David regardless ("God shows steadfast love to God's anointed, to David and to his descendants forever." verse 51), then military success would have built an enduring nation.

However, One called the "Son of David" much later could read His nation's history and God's will by admitting that "they who take the sword shall perish by the sword." And more prophetic thinkers than David would see in God's blessing of Israel a call to be "a light to the nations" instead of a trampler of nations.

In chapter 23, a writer was trying to wind up the scroll called *Samuel*. He gives "last words" of David, and then gives to some of the men who shared with David the credit for Hebrew victories in battles of that time. Thirty seven are named, and a few of the really good stories about some of them are referred to.

For instance, one fellow with a spear as long as his name, Joshebbasshebeth the Tahchemonite, killed eight hundred enemies at one time by himself. That number may have grown a little as his exploits were recounted around soldiers' campfires across the years. Similar exploits were attributed to the son of a man named Dodo (I didn't make that up) named Eleazar; another named Shammah; Abishai, Joab's brother credited with slaying three hundred single-handedly with his spear; and Benaiah, a good captain to have for David's bodyguard, who killed lions, handsome Egyptians, and anything else that got in his way.

They were rough and ready men, and a king who could not stay right with them would probably not have lasted very long. David not only stayed with them through many hard times, he was the acknowledged leader of them all. Perhaps one little story tucked into this chapter 23, which lists all the main fighters, is put there to show us why David kept their admiration and loyalty across the years.

David and his men were fighting a guerilla war out of the wilderness area of Judah back in the days when the Philistines occupied Bethlehem. One evening at the campfire, David wished out loud for a good drink of water from Bethlehem's well. Three of the men there gave each other the nod, and slipped out of the circle of fire light into the darkness of the night.

Together they made their way through the lines of Philistines, drew a flask full of water from the well, and returned to David's camp. Their trouble was worth it, they thought, when they saw the look on David's face as they presented him with the water he craved.

No doubt they would have been entirely satisfied if David had turned the container up and drunk every bit of the water. But when he looked at it, then almost reverently poured it out on the ground as an offering to the Lord, his statement bound them to him forever:

"Far be it from me, O Lord, that I should do this. Shall I drink the blood of the men who went at the risk of their lives?" (22:17)

That was a good note for ending, but some other writer or writers still had other stories about David to add. We find them in what is now the last chapter of *II Samuel*, chapter 24, and in the first

chapter and a half of the *First Book of Kings*.

Once again the Lord, according to the story, was angry with Israel. In order to get even with the people, God had the king take another census. With a census in hand, a government can check more closely on tax collections and can enforce military conscription. The Hebrews then welcomed these controls of their private lives just about as much as we do now.

General Joab, and the other officers who would be entrusted with the census job, tried to talk David out of the notion. They failed, so they had to take the next nine months and twenty days to go through all the country counting and recording the people.

Final count: eight hundred thousand men in Israel who could do army duty; five hundred thousand in Judah.

Now comes the sad part of the story. After the census, David is sorry he had it done. It was an affront to the independent people, he now decides. In fact, it was a sin before God. That part is o.k., but the part that is hard to figure out is the fact that God, who first "incited David" to do it, now counts it as a sin also.

"Lord, I pray You to take away my iniquity," David prayed one night. And the next morning an answer to his prayer came through a prophet named Gad,

"I am offering you three things... You can choose one of them and I'll hit you with it."

"What are my choices?" David asked.

Gad replied, "Number 1, three years of famine for your land.

"Number 2, you can have your enemies chase

you for three months while you run for your life.

“Number 3, three days of pestilence in your land.

“Choose which one you want and I’ll tell the Lord your decision.”

David thought about it. “I’m too old to run like I used to. My enemies would catch me and they would do worse to me than the merciful Lord will do, I am sure. So that’s out. Pestilence is terrible, but three days is a lot shorter than three years of famine. I guess I’ll take the pestilence.”

Before the three day period was up, seventy thousand people had died of a plague. In fact, the angel in charge of pestilence was warming up to the task so well, that God had to stop him just before he wiped Jerusalem out.

It happened that the angel was standing by the threshing floor of a Jebusite farmer named Araunah, when the Lord stayed his hand. Evidently the prophet, Gad, had inside information as to the angel’s whereabouts, because he came to David just after David had been asking God to take it out on him and his house and let the people alone.

“Go out to Araunah’s threshing floor,” Gad told him, “and set up an altar there.”

When Araunah saw the king and his party coming out to his place, he ran out to meet them. Bowing low to the ground, he welcomed them and asked why the king did him the honor of visiting his place.

“I’d like to buy your threshing floor in order to build an altar to the Lord on it. That may stop the plague that is killing our people,” David answered.

“No need to buy it; it’s yours to use,” Araunah told David. “I have the oxen here for the burnt of-

fering. You can use the threshing sledges and the yokes for wood. I give it all to you. And may God accept your offering.”

“Thanks, but I must buy it from you. I can’t offer to the Lord burnt offerings which cost me nothing.”

They settled on fifty shekels of silver and David built the altar and made the sacrifices. Evidently it was enough. The Lord called off the plague.

That was the story which ends the books of *Samuel* as we now have them, but we ought not to end this book without knowing about the very end of David’s reign, and the transfer of power to his successor. The first chapter of *I Kings* gives us that account.

From King To Kings

Now an old man, David seemed to suffer from perpetual hypothermia. Even loaded with clothes, he was always cold. His helpers tried the technique recommended for the backpacker whose body temperature falls dangerously low; someone gets into the sleeping bag with him or her. They found a beautiful maiden (beautiful maidens must be warmer than the rest of us) to be the king's nurse and companion. Her name was Abishag from Shunam, and though the Hebrew historian remembered her, David was too old to be unduly impressed.

The fact that David didn't warm up to Abishag must have been the tip-off that the end was near. At least his sons interpreted it that way, and one of them, Adonijah, born just after Absalom, prepared himself to be the new king. This was a kid whose father, David, had never taken the time to discipline him. He had always gotten anything he wanted. He was a handsome lad with winning ways. General Joab and one of David's two main priests, Abiathar, threw in with him. But in that group, nothing was ever unanimous.

The other priest, Zadok, along with Benaiah, the captain of the guards, and Nathan, the prophet, withheld their support. So did David's "mighty men." Consequently, when Adonijah put on a big celebration party to announce his candidacy, he did not invite any of them. Nor did he invite his brother, Solomon, even though he gave special invitations to all the rest of the family.

"Have you heard that Adonijah, the son of David and Haggith, has already become king and David doesn't even know it?" That was Nathan's question of Bathsheba, the mother of Solomon.

She was too stunned to answer. "Let me tell you what I think you ought to do, and do quickly," Nathan went on to suggest. "Go at once to David and say to him, 'did you not swear to me that our son Solomon would take the throne after you? Why then is Adonijah the new king?' Then, while you are still talking with him, I will come in and confirm what you are saying."

Bathsheba found the king in his bedroom, and after she did the necessary bowing and scraping, he said,

"What do you want?"

"My lord, you swore to me by the Lord your God that Solomon would sit on the throne after you and be the next king. But now Adonijah has proclaimed himself the king, although you don't even know it. He is already celebrating it as an actual fact. The people don't know what to believe. They are waiting for you to tell them who shall be king after you. If you don't do something right away, both Solomon and I will be in real danger from the new king, Adonijah."

Right on schedule, Nathan put in his appear-

ance. He ignored Bathsheba as if he had some important matter that couldn't wait.

"I'll come right to the point," Nathan said. "Did you give the word that Adonijah would be the new king after you? Right now, Joab and Abiathar, and many of our leaders are eating and drinking with Adonijah at what they take to be an inauguration party. They are all toasting him, 'Long live King Adonijah!' Of course, I and Zadok, and Benaiah, and Solomon were not invited. I can't imagine that you gave your word to all this and didn't tell us who the new king would be!"

"Bathsheba, step over here," David said. "I swore to you by all that is holy that Solomon, our son, should be the king after me. And that is still what I intend." With her head bowed, they couldn't see the immense look of relief on Bathsheba's face as she said with feeling, "May my lord King David live forever!"

Now, in spite of infirmity, David sprang into action. "Call Zadok and Benaiah to meet here with Nathan and me," he ordered. In a few minutes they were all there.

"Now, listen to this," David said. "Zadok, take the other priests and form a procession. Put Solomon on my mule, and take him to Gihon. There you, Nathan and Zadok, join in anointing him king over Israel. Have all your people shout, 'Long live King Solomon!' and bring him back here to sit on my throne. I have appointed him to be ruler over Israel and Judah."

"Amen," Benaiah shouted. "Now you're talking. As the Lord has been with you, may God also be with Solomon to make this kingdom even greater!"

Benaiah's Philistine guards made sure that none

of Adonijah's backers interrupted the parade or the ceremony performed by Nathan and Zadok. By the time they got back to the palace the crowd had grown enormously, and everybody who had a noisemaker or musical instrument had the volume turned up full blast.

The people at Adonijah's feast couldn't help but hear the racket.

"What in the world is going on?" Joab wanted to know. And almost before he had asked the question, Jonathan, the son of priest Abiathar came in.

"Welcome, Jonathan, you are a good man so we know you bring good news," Adonijah said cordially.

"I'm afraid not," Jonathan answered quickly. "The noise you hear is the celebration because king David had just made Solomon the new king! They've just come back from Gihon where Nathan and Zadok anointed him."

Throwing a large rattlesnake into the middle of the group could not have scattered them any faster than the news Jonathan brought. Adonijah himself ran to the tabernacle tent and held on to the horns of the altar where he was supposed to be immune to being killed. He sent word to Solomon that he would hang on there until Solomon made a pledge that he would not have Adonijah executed.

"If he proves to be a worthy man," Solomon answered, "not one of his hairs will fall to the earth; but if wickedness is found in him he will die like any other criminal."

There wasn't complete assurance, but it was the best he was going to get, so Adonijah came to the king and humbled himself. He was much relieved when Solomon told him he was free to go home.

Now, finally, actually, David was going to die. He first had to give his kingly son some last minute instructions. And in a few minutes he showed the strange mixture of moral greatness and smallness that not only characterized that H.B. but most H.B.s.

First, he urged Solomon to play the part of a real king, walking in God's ways, faithful heart and soul to God's commandment.

Then he added, probably under his breath so that his words didn't ring out as his preaching did, "Joab did two things I can never forgive. He killed Abner when I was trying to make peace with him, and he killed Amasa long after the fight between his men and ours was over.

"Those murders brought shame on me. I'm not telling you what to do, but don't let him die peaceably.

"And then that dirty dog of an Israelite, Shimei, who cursed me once, caught me on a good day and made me promise that I would never kill him. Well, I didn't, but that doesn't mean you shouldn't.

"Oh, yes, one other thing. Remember old man Barzillai of Mahanaim. He kept me and our army going with food when Absalom had taken over. Be especially kind to his family. Make them welcome any time at your table."

With those words, David closed out a reign of forty years, during which time he had established Jerusalem as a great capital city, and had made Israel the dominant nation in the whole middle east.

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